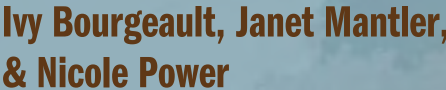
Academic Matters

Fall 2021

OCUFA'S JOURNAL OF HIGHER EDUCATION
LA REVUE DE L'ENSEIGNEMENT SUPÉRIEUR DE L'OCUFA

Wrestling with mental health



Ivy Bourgeault, Janet Mantler, & Nicole Power
The challenges faculty face

Michael Butler
Alarming trends in student mental health

Jesmen Mendoza
Creating a culture of care

Miriam Edelson
How unions defend their members from psychological hazards

Ameil Joseph & Shaila Kumbhare
Mental health, grief, loss, and bereavement through COVID-19

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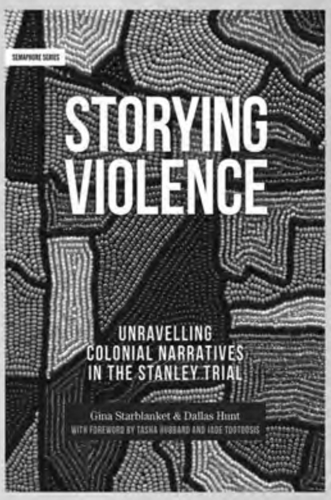

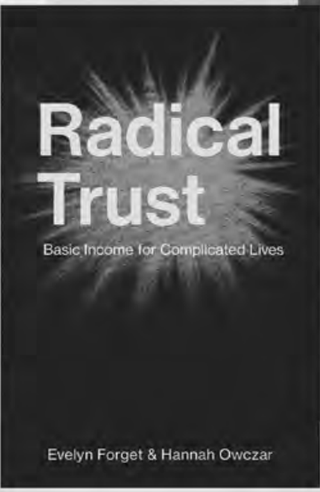

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This journal is produced in the Dish With One Spoon Territory, which extends from the Great Lakes to Quebec and from Lake Simcoe into the United States. The territory exists as the result of a treaty between the Anishinaabe, Mississaugas, and Haudenosaunee that bound them to protect and share the land and creatures within it. Subsequent Indigenous nations and peoples, Europeans, and all newcomers have been invited into this treaty in the spirit of peace, friendship, and respect. It is in this spirit that each issue of *Academic Matters* is produced.

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Academic Matters

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LA REVUE DE L'ENSEIGNEMENT SUPÉRIEUR DE L'OCUFA

Academic Matters is published two times a year by OCUFA, and is received by 17,000 professors, academic librarians, and others interested in higher education issues across Canada. The journal explores issues of relevance to higher education in Ontario, other provinces in Canada, and globally. It is intended to be a forum for thoughtful, thought-provoking, original, and engaging discussion of current trends in postsecondary education and consideration of academia's future direction.

Readers are encouraged to contribute their views, ideas, and talents. Letters to the editor (maximum 250 words) are welcome and may be edited for length. To provide an article or artwork for Academic Matters, please send your query to Editor-in-Chief Ben Lewis at editor@academicmatters.ca.

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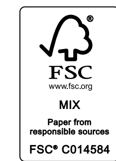

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Editorial Matters

Ben Lewis

Stress and anxiety in higher education

UNIVERSITIES ARE designed as spaces where minds are nurtured—where expertise develops and new knowledge is generated. However, not all is well within the walls of the academy. Under academic, financial, and social pressures, faculty and students are more frequently reporting poor mental health.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, concern had been growing around mental health struggles at Ontario's universities. Workload for tenured faculty and academic librarians was rising, contract faculty were working term-to-term without any guarantee of continued employment, and students were stringing together multiple jobs in efforts to afford the highest tuition fees in Canada. Stress and anxiety were on the rise and taking a toll.

Enter a global health pandemic. Suddenly, faculty were scrambling to move their courses online and adapting to the isolation of remote work. Meanwhile, students were also having to pivot online and many had to take on additional debt because the pandemic left them without any supplementary employment to help pay the bills.

On top of this were overarching concerns about physical health and safety. Suddenly, basic errands meant risking exposure to the virus. Social support systems broke down and university services struggled to meet the new challenges introduced by the pandemic. Confined and cut off, academic staff and students have struggled to care for themselves and carry on with their academic work, in addition to caring for family and friends.

In this issue of *Academic Matters*, we explore the mental health dilemma in the academy. In a space that is supposed to cultivate knowledge and nourish the mind, what does it mean that the mental health of faculty, staff, and students has reached a crisis point? How do we address the causes of poor mental health in our university communities?

Contributing to this issue are Ivy Bourgeault, Janet Mantler, and Nicole Power, whose work has examined the relationship among mental health, leaves of absence, and return to work for university faculty. With academics increasingly feeling that they must choose between productivity and their own mental health, the authors argue that individualized responses are inadequate and that a more substantial overhaul of academia's neoliberal structure is required.

Michael Butler examines students' struggles with mental health and identifies some of the existing conditions that have contributed to their stress and anxiety. The data is alarming, but, as Michael details, there are numerous initiatives postsecondary institutions can take to address the systemic causes of poor student mental health and to provide better services and supports.

Jesmen Mendoza considers the important role faculty play in supporting students. While most faculty are not trained—and should not be expected—to diagnose or guide students through periods of poor mental health, sometimes they are the first people students turn to for help and Mendoza provides guidance about how faculty can help struggling students by showing compassion and pointing them to existing campus supports.

Miriam Edelson explores how faculty associations and unions defend their members from both physical and psychological hazards. As poor mental health has become a greater concern in workplaces everywhere, unions have been evolving their approaches to supporting their members' interests and advancing new and better mental health protections in collective agreements.

Rounding out our focus on mental health, Ameil Joseph and Shaila Kumbhare curate a selection of resources from *A Way Through*, a McMaster University project they designed to support Canadians in navigating the numerous online resources addressing grief in the time of COVID-19.

Finally, we are pleased to republish the first story resulting from the OCUFA Fellowship in Higher Education Journalism. Nicholas Hune-Brown spent two years investigating the troubling yet growing international student recruitment industry. His article paints a fascinating, revealing, and concerning picture of the international student recruitment industry.

Thanks to this issue's authors for their contributions. Mental health is a challenging subject, but we are in a moment where identifying the causes of poor mental health and exploring remedies is more important than ever. For the academy to function as intended, it must be a space that nurtures healthy minds.

A reminder that all the articles in this issue, and many more, are available on our website: AcademicMatters.ca.

Thanks for reading. AM

Ben Lewis is the Editor-in-Chief of Academic Matters and Communications Lead for OCUFA.

MENTAL HEALTH IN ACADEMIA: The challenges faculty face predate the pandemic and require systemic solutions

Ivy Bourgeault, Janet Mantler, & Nicole Power

The pandemic has intensified many stress points for faculty and academic librarians while highlighting existing issues with how academic work is structured. This has left many feeling that they must choose between productivity and their own mental health.

Mental health in academia has never been so tenuous. The pandemic and rapid shift to remote teaching exacerbated the impacts of pre-existing heavy workloads and increasing expectations around academic productivity. Taken together, these have negatively affected the mental health of university faculty. This problem did not start with the pandemic: faculty and their unions have been raising concerns about the impact of working conditions on faculty members' mental health well before this time.

In 2018, our Healthy Professional Worker Partnership brought together an interdisciplinary team of researchers and community partners from across Canada to examine the relationship among mental health, leaves of absence, and return to work. We studied the impacts across seven professions, including university faculty. At the outset, our intent was to shift our focus from a worker's individual experiences of stressful occupational circumstances and coping strategies to the conditions of work, particularly within the gendered organization of familial and university care work and the broader context of the neoliberal academy. Interrupted by the pandemic, we gathered data from several sources—surveys and interviews with faculty and key stakeholders—within the context of a review of the existing literature.

Our emerging findings suggest that we all need to be concerned.

The State of Mental Health in Academia

The research literature we gathered reveals that concerns about mental ill-health in academia are not new. Two decades ago, Gail Kinman reviewed the research on academic stressors and strains and pointed out that faculty members in many countries consistently report high levels of stress, anxiety, and other mental health issues. This has been corroborated with more recent studies from around the globe. A 2003 Australian study found that mental illness in academic staff was three to four times higher than that of the general population. A 2010 pan-Canadian study of academics reported that 24 per cent of their sample had a substantial level of psychological distress. A 2017 RAND Europe report stated that 37 per cent of academic staff indicated a mental health disorder. That same year, a British study found that 43 per cent of the academics they sampled had symptoms of a mild mental disorder, the most prevalent of which were depression, anxiety and burnout. In our survey, almost two-thirds of academics reported experiencing mental health issues, such as anxiety, psychological distress, depression, and burnout, at some point in their career.

In contrast to those in tenured or tenure-track positions, those working as contract faculty experience mental ill-health due to their job insecurity, compounded by uncertain or unfair hiring practices, poor financial compensation, and a marginalized status in the academic community. A recent Canadian Association of University Teachers report found that precarious work is a major source of stress for contract faculty and that women and racialized academic staff were more likely to report high levels of stress.

Relationship to Workload, Organization of Work, and Other Systemic Factors

The organization of academic work presents a paradox. Autonomy is one of the most enticing features of being an academic. We have freedom to choose the work we want to do and the topics we research. However, the university is what some have called a greedy organization. Universities can be seen as systemically taking advantage of the vocational commitment and professional integrity of academics, increasingly requiring them to build more

impressive CVs to secure tenure, promotion, and research funding—even in the face of budget restraints.

Our survey respondents overwhelmingly cited heavy workloads as being a key source of work-related stress. In the pandemic, workloads have further intensified with the shift to online teaching and the need to maintain research and service commitments remotely. Indeed, over one-third of our respondents noted digital stress as a critical concern.

The *publish or perish* adage is not new. However, faculty members are increasingly expected to publish more, specifically in "high impact" journals, and to compete for and win larger and larger grants. In addition to high research productivity, academics are frequently expected to engage in community partnerships and knowledge exchange, often through increased use of social media or writing for the broader public. This work takes time and energy but is not weighted heavily in tenure and promotion decisions nor in reviews of productivity for research grants.

A concern related to workload noted by study participants was the anxiety they experience due, in part, to being under constant evaluation. Academics are evaluated by their students, peers, universities, granting agencies, and sometimes in the press and court of public opinion. We know from other research that the use of audit and ranking systems in academia contributes to the ongoing sense of anxiety among academic workers.

Gender and career stage matter

Work-related pressures start early for academics, and it is during the process of career establishment when they report growing stress levels. Research shows that for someone to get a tenure-track job, successful applicants require a greater number of "quality" publications now than in the past. These heavy workloads and a culture that champions working long hours result in stress-induced poor mental health among academics. It may be expected that by mid-career the pressure would let up, but less productive mid-career academics can be shamed or labelled as "deadwood," with productivity defined almost exclusively in terms of publications and grants. Maintaining high productivity levels in academia has been shown to be particularly challenging for those with underlying mental health issues.

Given that academic work environments are gendered, experiences of mental health in the workplace are also gendered, with women academics identifying work-life balance, familial care work, and emotional labour as significant factors affecting their mental health.

Our survey revealed gender differences similar to a 2008 study of occupational stress experienced by academics. In both studies women reported significant stress from having to manage work, a disproportionate responsibility for family care, a non-supportive organizational environment, and a feeling of being undervalued. Research also reveals that longer working hours are associated with work-life conflict for women faculty but not for men.

Gender inequity has a significant impact on the mental health of women in higher education, exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has exposed long-standing inequities among faculty, with women academics disproportionately affected by the brunt of additional care and housework. Many women academics have lost ground, unable to write and conduct research. Some universities responded to faculty and union concerns with extended deadlines for tenure and promotion; however, these kinds of policy changes and accommodations can have inadvertent negative impacts on women faculty. In a study examining the impact of supposedly gender-neutral family-friendly "stop the clock" tenure policies, researchers found that these substantially reduced tenure rates among women and increased rates among men. This finding points to the unintended impact of policies that do not take into account the longer-term impacts of caregiving.

Notably, much of the research only examines gender from a binary perspective. Our research is inclusive of diverse gender identities and is only starting to uncover these heretofore-invisible dynamics.

The invisibility and individualization of the problem

The mental health dialogue within academia is marred by significant stigma, which has provoked considerable debate about whether one should disclose their mental health issues or disability in the academy. Indeed, even among those respondents to our survey that identified mental health concerns, less than a quarter opted to take a leave of absence. This was due, in part, to potential stigma, but also because they did not want to further burden their colleagues with extra teaching and student supervision. This results in a high level of presenteeism during which people are working while ill. It may be that disclosing mental health struggles is easier after establishment in one's field, similar to disclosing disabilities.

Our research shows that mental health resources in universities are difficult for academics to find. If a faculty member wants to take a leave for mental health reasons, very few know the process for taking a leave or even who to contact. This corroborates research revealing that university workplaces lack institutional policy supporting faculty wellness more broadly.

Universities are beginning to take action on students' mental health, in part through the endorsement of the Okanagan Charter. Ironically, these initiatives can increase expectations that faculty members are able to help students dealing with mental ill-health. Some universities have mental health initiatives for staff and faculty, encouraging them to take lunch and yoga breaks. These tend to focus on individual coping behaviours and fail to address underlying systemic and organizational issues.

Academic flexibility in terms of their working hours and ability to work remotely when not teaching may provide individuals with a mechanism for managing their mental health—though not always well. Because of the autonomy our positions afford, faculty can hide their mental ill-health by working from home or waiting until a sabbatical to seek relief. Such individualized strategies are reinforced by neoliberal systems of productivity surveillance. This flexibility, combined with university mental health programs that focus on individual resiliency, may serve to keep mental health issues hidden, exacerbating what Rosalind Gill calls the "hidden injuries of neoliberal academia."

Taking more direct action

Many, including the authors of The Slow Professor Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber, have called for a change in how academic work is done. They reject the individualized responses to productivity pressures, such as developing better time management habits. Instead, they call on academics to question what productivity means. Observations of how the academic system negatively affects our well-being and calls for more reflection have largely been ignored and, in some cases, even derided.

We need to develop policies and collective agreement language that mitigate conditions for overwork in tenure and promotion criteria, that improve the job security and the status of our contract faculty, and that address uneven impacts of care work on academic productivity. As a collective, we need to believe that we are more than our CVs.

We concur with the RAND Europe report that urges institutions to work more closely with government regulators on health and safety in the workplace in order to address risks to the psychological health and safety of academic staff. In Canada, we have played a leadership role internationally with the development of a National Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace. But, even when adopted, these guidelines are voluntary, enabling organizations to continue with the status quo. As long as the reward structures in academia are oriented in the neoliberal direction, there will likely be no behaviour change among academics. It is time for academic leadership to reconsider what the current neoliberal model of academia does to all of us, even those of us who are most successful under this model.

As we consider how the academic system affects each of us, we leave you with the compelling words of one of our participants: "My mental health has been so detrimentally affected by my career that I don't know how I'm going to make it to the end of my career. I don't know how I'm going to survive that long…it's hard to survive in such a competitive environment. The anxiety over that is huge…I have a really uncomfortable time at work despite the fact that I'm really successful in what I do. My publications are fine. I'm successful, but the cost is just too high." AM

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Nicole Power is a Professor in the Department of Sociology at Memorial University. *The authors would like to acknowledge Yvonne James for her the contributions to the literature review upon which some parts of this commentary are based.*

ALARMING TRENDS IN STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH: What can postsecondary education institutions do?

Michael Butler

The data on student mental health is concerning, but there are clear steps postsecondary institutions can take to address the systemic causes of this growing crisis.

The existing conditions jeopardizing student mental health

The COVID-19 pandemic has deeply exacerbated pre-existing issues within postsecondary education (PSE) in Ontario. Students have struggled through the past year and face a myriad of challenges to maintain their wellbeing. This pandemic, and our response to it, can be a wake-up call to manifest a more equitable, robust, high-quality PSE system in Ontario that accounts for student mental health. Whether PSE institutions and the provincial government answer this call will be the crucial determinant of our success in rebuilding a prosperous, healthy society for all Ontarians.

Mental health is not an individual issue; it has systemic causes. The mental health crisis at Ontario postsecondary institutions is due, in large part, to the continuing pressures and inequities prevalent in student life. Every day, students face housing insecurity, food insecurity, and healthcare insecurity. Every day, students navigate the harmful effects of racism, transphobia, homophobia, sexism, ableism, classism, and colonialism. Every day, students balance the demands of rigorous programs in institutions that put performance metrics over their wellbeing. Every day, students juggle multiple jobs to afford postsecondary education. Without drastic changes to the systems and structures that students endure, personal action for one's own mental health will not be enough.

Over two-thirds of continuing postsecondary students have said they are very or extremely concerned about the pandemic's financial impacts on their lives.

There is not room to address each of these issues in this article, but if we look at just the financial pressures and barriers that have become obvious during the pandemic, it will highlight the expansive nature of the challenges today's students face.

Financial pressures and barriers faced by postsecondary students

Ontario has some of the highest tuition fees in the country and lowest per capita student funding nationally, and a job market where 70 per cent of jobs now require some level of PSE. In the past three budgets, the provincial government has reduced operating funding for PSE and, as the actuals from the quarterly reports of the Financial Accountability Office of Ontario show, this government repeatedly spends well below their estimates on PSE. Additionally, over the past two years, more than $1 billion has been cut from the Ontario Student Assistance Program, leaving students with significantly larger debt loads. This comes at a time of record unemployment for Ontario students in the youth category.

So, it comes as no surprise then that over two-thirds of continuing postsecondary students have said they are very or extremely concerned about the pandemic's financial impacts on their lives. The above factors can be further compounded by the fact that in the midst of the pandemic, Ontario witnessed the largest increase in average rents and one of the lowest vacancy rates in the country. As a result of high tuition fees, dwindling financial assistance for students, and the pandemic, recent data shows that 44 per cent of postsecondary students are concerned about paying their current expenses, 46 per cent are worried about paying next term's tuition fees, and 43 per cent are worried about their ability to afford next term's accommodation.

It is also worth noting that, while the Ford government's so called "Student Choice Initiative" has now been unanimously defeated at two levels of court, this measure had a major impact on peer support services offered by students' unions at the time students have needed them most.

International students face unique challenges

One aspect of the pandemic that has received little attention is its effect on international students. By 2016-17, international students made up 13.6 per cent of university students and 9 per cent of college students in Ontario, the most popular provincial destination for international students in Canada. As a result of declining operating funding

from the provincial government, international tuition fees represented nearly 20 per cent of total operating revenues in aggregate in 2018-19. Yet, unlike their peers, international students could not stay at home and protect themselves from exposure to the virus, as they did not qualify for the Canada Emergency Student Benefit. International students also do not qualify for coverage under the Ontario Health Insurance Plan, a benefit that was stripped from them in 1994. This has left them dependent on private health care plans and out-of-pocket costs for health services.

More recently, last minute decisions to return to in-person studies this fall left many international students scrambling to find accommodations. Some faced challenges meeting Canadian entry requirements on short notice because the vaccines they received in their home countries were not recognized by the Canadian government.

89.5 per cent of students feel overwhelmed by their workload.

The data on student mental health is alarming

It comes as no surprise that recent studies show that 89.5 per cent of students feel overwhelmed by their workload. Similarly, young people aged 15 to 24 are more likely to experience mental health issues than other age groups, which significantly impacts their social connections, educational goals, and workforce participation. During their time at university or college, as many as one in five students met the diagnostic criteria for a mental health disorder and 30 to 50 per cent of students reported experiencing overwhelming stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. During 2018, 68.9 per cent of students felt overwhelming anxiety, 16.4 per cent seriously considered suicide, and 51.6 per cent felt so depressed that it was difficult to function. In December 2020, the Canadian Mental Health Association found that 61 per cent of those with a pre-existing mental health issue faced a deterioration in their mental health following the second wave of the pandemic. The overall burden of mental illness and addiction in Ontario is more than 1.5 times the burden of all cancers, and 7 times the burden of all infectious diseases. It is no surprise then that the current demand for student mental health services is far beyond the capacity of existing delivery models.

No matter where students are on the mental wellness continuum, more needs to be done. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exposed many of the gaps in PSE supports that students have long been calling for action on. As students return to in-person learning, their mental health has been ignored by institutions and the government. After failing to consult students and student groups as sector stakeholders, the provincial government's Postsecondary Education Health Measures Framework for Fall 2021 (which exempts PSE Institutions from needed capacity limits, distancing measures, and adequate HVAC requirements), failed to include any new services or funding increases for mental health supports beyond platitudes that mental health is important. As such, the Canadian Federation of Students-Ontario is preparing to launch our new *Equity for Mental Health* campaign, which calls for institutions and the provincial government to recognize the systemic structures that affect students' mental health daily.

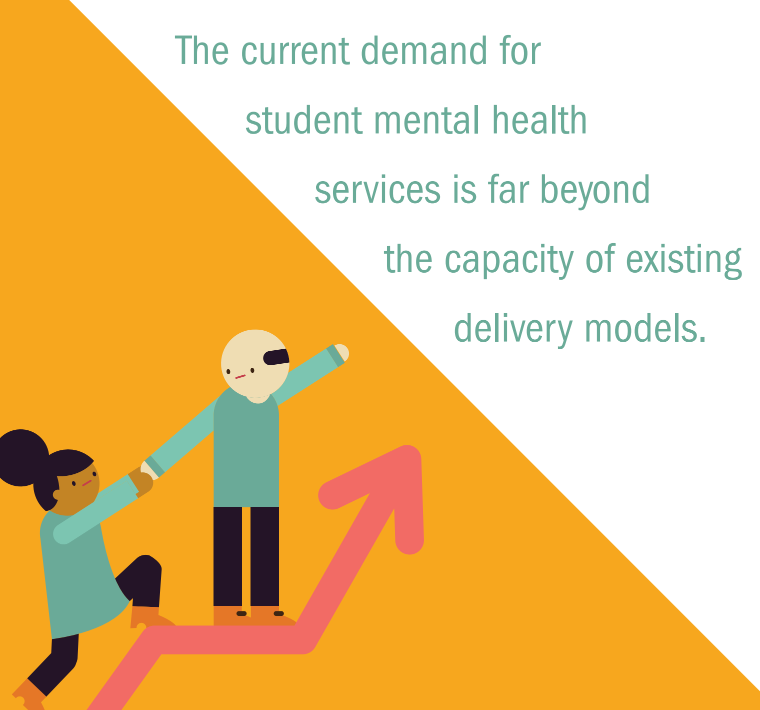
Recommendations for postsecondary education institutions

Postsecondary institutions have a responsibility to ensure campus culture prioritizes student wellbeing and mental health. The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion highlights that "health is created and lived by people within the settings of their everyday life: where they learn, work, play and love." As such, postsecondary institutions offer an essential environment to promote mental health and address student mental health needs. Mental health promotion needs to move beyond an individual focus and address social determinants of health by proactively embedding wellness in institutional policies and campus cultures. Student health needs to be prioritized in all aspects of campus culture, including within institutions' administrations, operations, and academic mandates. Sadly, it is only in the face of tragedy and media attention that institutions take tangible action to create safer mental health environments for students. Proactive approaches are needed and students need to be consulted. With their lived experiences, students are essential sector stakeholders who deserve to be valued as equal partners.

Reduce barriers and improve access to mental health services

The current pathways for students to access resources, supports, and care are unclear and create a serious barrier for students looking for help. For students experiencing mental health challenges or crises, it is especially difficult to find the services they need. What is to be done?

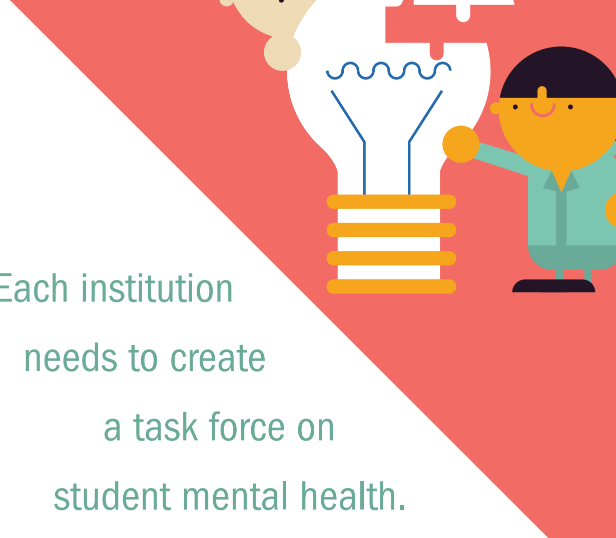
- **Build a centralized path to access all mental health and wellness services on campus.** Students need a single institutional access point where they can easily learn what to do if they are seeking support or are in distress. This should include creating a user-friendly website that streamlines access to all care and services on campus. This website needs to include updated bookings systems and a clear overview of services (including student-led services).
- **Remove all requirements of a diagnosis to access mental health services or accommodations.** Accommodations should be given to everyone who needs them, not just those who have access to a medical professional or a diagnosis. Not all students have access to mental health services, and not all students present struggles that fit into a specific diagnosis. This can be particularly challenging for international students because they are not covered by OHIP and having a diagnosis could negatively impact future immigration processes. The implied worry among administrations that opening up accommodations will invite healthy students to exploit the system is unfounded and is far less important than accounting for the many students who currently do not have the accommodations they need due to the requirement of medical confirmation.
- **Prioritize the mental wellness of students above their academic performance.** This includes removing Verification of Illness (VOI) forms in favour of self-declared sick notes. The VOI is frustrating and inefficient for both students and service providers. Students need to be trusted in knowing their own conditions and knowing what is best for them.



Improve mental health resources and services for students

Reports of students experiencing mental health challenges, such as psychological distress, anxiety, and depression, have increased since 2013, but most mental health services on Ontario campuses have not successfully accommodated this increased demand. Students struggle with accessing quality and timely mental health care.

- **Increase mental health resources.** Increase the number of counsellors, as well as emergency and non-emergency mental health services on campus to reduce wait times and avoid referring students to external services. Ensure same day appointments and crisis support for students.
- **Provide a 24/7 police-free mental health intervention team.** The lack of after-hours, weekend, and evening support leaves students alone in times of distress. A reliable, non-violent, trauma-informed task force must be available to respond to students in need.
- **Prioritize diversifying counselling and psychiatry teams to ensure students have culturally appropriate options.** There is a need for therapists to understand a students' background, ethnicity, or belief system to provide the appropriate and quality mental health support.
- **Bring mental health staff to students.** Using an embedded counselling model, institutions should provide integrated spaces for mental health staff to better incorporate the on-campus support system. Providing diverse, local, and flexible services throughout different campus locations facilitates timely



help-seeking behaviour. Studies show that for marginalized and international students, the availability of more flexible and diverse formats for counselling services is important.

- **Each institution needs to create a task force on student mental health.** At a minimum, the task force should review student mental health services and delivery at the institution; review the coordination of services; explore expansion of community partnerships; address shortfalls in resources and advise on specific allocations or increases; and look at the spaces in which mental health services are being offered. The mandate must be comprehensive and not restricted. The task force and associated reports must not be for their own sake but result in tangible action.
- **Include students equally in the process.** Student mental health is a shared responsibility. Students and students' unions need to be equal stakeholders and partners in this process, along with faculty, staff, and administrators. This process must be transparent.
- **To ensure recommendations are acted on, clear deliverables, timelines, evaluation processes, and accountability measures must be included.** Transparent deliverables need to be met and tools must be developed to ensure appropriate uptake. Accountability in meeting recommendations need to be assured and initiatives need to be rigorously evaluated.

Each institution needs to create a task force on student mental health.

Address intersectional barriers and student precarity on campus

Students are not a homogenous group, and the current structures, norms, and values in place at postsecondary institutions do not serve all students. Many students experience the harmful effects of racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, classism, and colonialism on a daily basis. These stressors have a significant impact on student health and wellbeing. It is essential that postsecondary institutions examine their teaching and administrative practices, and mandate mental health and anti-oppressive training for all faculty and staff. Maintaining student centeredness in all activities is essential to promoting mentally healthy campuses.

- **Using an anti-oppressive framework, institutions must review teaching practices, the campus environment, campus services, and student experiences on campus.** Students should be actively involved in this review process as equal stakeholders and not merely consultants.
- **Mandatory anti-oppressive training for all counsellors, faculty, and staff.** This should be a minimum requirement so that faculty, staff, and mental health professionals can recognize their own implicit biases and privileges, while understanding the systemic struggles their students face on a daily basis. This training will improve students' mental health by creating a more understanding environment and by removing the burden of educating faculty and staff about their identities.
- **Ban handcuffing practices for mental health crises.** Handcuffing a student in crisis is traumatizing and damaging. Under no circumstances should a student who is in psychological distress be handcuffed.
- **Remove all police and security staff as first responders to mental health crises on campus.** Police and security staff are not properly trained to handle mental health crises, and they are especially unsafe for 2SLGBTQ+ and BIPOC students, who are constantly targeted by these systems.
- **Enhance mental health literacy among students, staff, and faculty.** To reduce stigma and ignorance surrounding mental health on campus, institutions should include mental health awareness and prevention training in all orientation and training sessions for students, staff, and faculty. AM

Michael Butler (he/him) is the Government Relations & Policy Coordinator for the Canadian Federation of Students-Ontario.

CREATING A CULTURE OF CARE: Addressing student feelings of isolation, stress, and hopelessness

Jesmen Mendoza

Sometimes, faculty are the first people students turn to for help when their mental health is suffering. How can faculty and academic librarians help build a more compassionate campus and assist these students in accessing existing campus supports?

Student mental health has become a growing concern over the last

two decades.

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed and emphasized that a necessary precursor to learning is mental health and wellbeing. Students who are in distress may seek out assistance and sometimes that may mean approaching faculty members with whom the student has regular contact. Responding to (and perhaps even noticing) a student who is floundering, struggling, or languishing (clinical terms taken from positive psychology to identify an individual's state of wellbeing and mental illness) can be challenging and raises questions about whether it is the professoriate's responsibility to respond to this distress and, if so, how they should respond.

Towards a culture of care

Universities, at their core, are learning communities where students, staff, and faculty come together to pursue common academic and research goals. That work is most effective when those involved are both physically and mentally healthy. Students who possess high levels of emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing are most likely flourishing and able to engage in the learning process with little distraction. However, those with low levels of emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing are likely to be floundering and potentially dealing with mental health challenges resulting in difficulties with studying, learning, and meeting academic responsibilities in a timely manner. That is not to say that students who seem well may not be dealing with mental health issues or that those floundering need special mental health supports.

Student mental health has become a growing concern over the last two decades. According to the Ontario University and College Health Association, there was a 433 per cent increase in accommodation requests from those claiming mental illness disabilities at Ontario postsecondary institutions between 2004 and 2014 and mental health problems for young adults were expected to have increased by 50 per cent between 2015 and 2020. Despite how alarming these statistics might seem, some researchers believe that student mental health and well-being are no worse than the broader population. Instead, the rise might be better explained by diminishing stigma, increased mental health literacy, and better help-seeking behaviour. Nevertheless, current data from Statistics Canada indicate that the pandemic has exacerbated postsecondary students' mental health struggles.

Are universities responsible for their students' mental health and wellbeing? Expectations are generally that it is the healthcare sector's responsibility to meet the physical and mental health needs of postsecondary students. However, mental health and addictions facilities and the social services sector as a whole are at capacity in providing support to the broader population. This means that

Our role as faculty members is to connect struggling students to supports, resources, and services at our universities.

postsecondary institutions, and those who work for them, may have more of a role to play. This is likely an unsatisfactory answer to the question of whose responsibility it is to respond to student mental health issues. Instead of framing the postsecondary education sector as responsible for covering gaps in the already-beleaguered health care system, it might be better to adopt a different framework altogether.

Universities may want to consider how a learning community should not only pursue common academic and research goals but also create a culture of care. The care that I am describing here is not the professional caring labour that is provided by the mental health practitioners on campus. Rather, I am referring to the creation of a culture of care that fosters compassion for others and recognizes students who are in distress. A culture of care within our learning communities is a culture that recognizes that learning is at its best when the student learner is healthy and one that acknowledges we all have a responsibility to show compassion in our learning communities. Thus, faculty, staff, and administrators do have a role to play when responding to students with mental health concerns.

Responding to students with mental health concerns[1]

Students who are struggling, floundering, or languishing in their studies may not automatically seek help, as they may not know about the mental health supports and services available on their campus. However, there are signs to help identify these students. There might be a rapid decline in the grades of a student who has long been academically successful. Some students may display disruptive behavior or outbursts in lectures, labs, studios, or seminars. A decrease in participation or intermittent attendance may indicate that a student is struggling.

It is important to understand that distress may be expressed in a number of different ways and that a faculty member's role in a caring learning community does not require us to treat, solve, or intervene with those students—it's best to leave that to mental health practitioners and student affairs staff on your campuses. Rather, our role as faculty members is to connect struggling students to supports, resources, and services at our universities.

To support students that might be in need of mental health aids and services, it might be helpful to contact them outside of formal class time (e.g., via email) and invite them to have a conversation over phone, by video, or in person (following public health guidance in your region). If students accept your invitation, share what you have observed and ask questions that promote discussion. In other words, ask open-ended questions and stay away from inquiries that yield a "yes" or "no" response. Also, refrain from giving advice (leave that to the experts) and stay away from asking questions that start with "why," as it may make students feel they are being interrogated instead of being supported. An example of how you might open up the conversation would be "I've noticed you are missing a lot of lectures and are often late. I wanted to check in with you. How are you doing?" The most important task when you check in with students is to listen and empathize with them. Listening and empathizing will help you with the next step.

If it seems that the student may be in need of additional help, provide them with information about the available resources and supports on campus. You may discover that they already have their own personal support network and your role might simply be to encourage them to access it. If that is not the case or you believe those students would still benefit from receiving more support, it would be helpful to familiarize yourself with what exists at your university beforehand. Talk to your chair or your dean and explore the programs and supports your university's counselling

It has become more evident that we need to move towards a culture of care and compassion.

service, medical centre, and accessibility centre have available to assist students in various levels of distress. Being familiar with these campus resources and supports before meeting with the student allows you to make a timely and appropriate referral. To make these referrals, you might try saying, "It took a lot of courage for you to tell me how you're struggling. I know some people on campus who can help. Can I pass that information on to you?"

Later, you may find yourself worrying about the student or even frustrated that you do not know if they have accessed available supports. It may be tempting to try to find out about their progress or to follow up with them. Remember that support services may not be able to share what they know about them, as they are likely obliged to provide the student with privacy and confidentiality. It is also important to keep in mind that a faculty member's part in a culture of care on campus is only to connect students with the resources and supports—not to shepherd students through the process or solve their personal problems.

As scholars, sometimes we want to (over)see matters through to the end, and it may be difficult not knowing how our students' affairs will resolve itself themselves. So, practice self-compassion and discuss any remaining concerns about the student with your dean, department chair, a trusted senior colleague, a member of your university's counselling service, or staff in your workplace wellbeing services, while maintaining the student's privacy. They should be able to provide further advice and guidance.

Students at risk of harm to themselves

Not all students in distress will present with suicidal ideas, thoughts, or plans. However, if a student does mention to you that they are thinking of ending their life immediately, it is imperative to remember that your role is to refer that student to your local hospital's emergency room, crisis centre, or to call 911—do not try to intervene or perform a suicide risk assessment. If you are on campus when this occurs, coordinate and inform your university's security and safety personnel of your actions in case paramedical staff require assistance navigating the campus. If the student is not imminently planning but actively thinking about ending their life, contact your university's counselling and/or medical centres and convey to them that you would like to arrange access to a same-day, urgent care appointment for that student. Most university counselling and medical centres should have this type of service.

Finally, if you do find yourself in this stressful situation, it is very important, as previously mentioned, to practice self-compassion and to talk to others at your university about what you have experienced. Talking to others

can help you gain perspective and rejuvenate your own compassion. After all, you may also be in need of care from your learning community.

Final thoughts

In a time when everyone's mental wellbeing is challenged by the uncertainty of a public health crisis that seems unending, it has become more evident that we need to move towards a culture of care and compassion. Student mental health, in particular, would benefit from such a cultural shift.

We need to recognize that it is everyone's responsibility to build this culture of care. Faculty members have a crucial role to play, as we spend more time with our students than most other staff at the university and are well-placed to help struggling, languishing, or floundering students to access the resources and supports available to them. We can also create learning environments that encourage students to build supportive, inclusive, and respectful relationships with each other. These simple efforts can go a long way in promoting a culture of care within our learning communities and addressing the feelings of isolation, stress, and hopelessness that typically underlie most of our students' mental health concerns. AM

If you know students who can benefit from professional counselling over the phone, feel free to refer them to Good2talk (1-866-925-5454), which is a province-wide, confidential, free service for postsecondary students where they can receive support and local referral information on mental health, addictions, and wellbeing. This service is funded by the Ministry of Colleges and Universities.

Jesmen Mendoza is a registered psychologist and professional counsellor at X University's (renaming in process) Centre for Student Development and Counselling where he provides therapy and counselling to students on a range of mental health and developmental concerns. In addition to these supports, Dr. Mendoza provides consultation to faculty and staff on tricky students issues and is currently serving as the Grievance Officer and Chair of the X Faculty Association's Grievance Committee.

1. This section is based on the "Notice, Engage, Refer, Debrief" program at X University (renaming in process). My fellow colleague and faculty association member, Dr. Diana Brecher from the Centre for Student Development and Counselling, originally developed this program which was then later elaborated upon by the University's Student Wellbeing (division of Student Affairs) and Workplace Wellbeing Services (a Unit of Human Resources).

How unions defend their members from psychological hazards

Miriam Edelson

As poor mental health has become a greater concern in workplaces, unions have been evolving how they support their members and advance new and better mental health protections in collective agreements.

Psychosocial hazards in postsecondary education are directly linked to government-driven neoliberal strategies.

The biomedical framing

Unions have occasionally been given a bad reputation for how they handle the mental health challenges of their members. In this short piece, I argue that new approaches to mental health issues are evolving in most unions, in both the public and private sectors. These approaches suggest a new perspective—that unions are already engaged in advocating for the psychological health and safety of their members and that their approach continues to evolve as mental health issues are better understood.

Health and safety, a broader definition

Unions have a strong legacy defending the health and safety of their members from hazards at work. Historically, occupational health and safety struggles took place in mines and factories but, more recently, they are occurring in healthcare, education, and other service industries.

Union health and safety activists—who analyze the root cause of safety issues—are now trained to recognize *psychosocial hazards*, that is, to consider psychological safety. Issues such as violence, harassment, and bullying in the workplace have, in part, necessitated this perspective. Unions have also been key players in the significant lobbying efforts that resulted in improving legislation regarding these vital concerns.

What are psychosocial hazards?

Psychosocial hazards refer to work organization: how work is coordinated by the employer, individual workload, and interpersonal workplace relationships that may affect the health of employees. Work organization does not just include how work is arranged, but the agency one has over one's work, possibilities for advancement, and whether one feels that their work is important and meaningful.

Psychosocial hazards in postsecondary education are directly linked to government-driven neoliberal strategies, including privatization, the underfunding of postsecondary education, attacks on campus unions, and the proliferation of contingent contract employment. These all increase psychosocial hazards and workplace stress.

Stress due to excessive workload is frequently an issue on campus and unions regularly tackle workload problems through negotiated workload committees and collective agreement language. My research indicates that these efforts are achieving some measure of success. However, it must be acknowledged that combating psychosocial risk is complicated because the hazards exist in processes and decision-making that are often initially invisible to members and their unions.

A psychosocial safety lens

Applying a psychosocial safety lens to mental health has certain implications for both a union and its members. First, while psychiatry and the biomedical model frame mental health as an individual problem with individual solutions, this is only part of the story. Of course, people need access to competent health care. However, the biomedical framing of mental illness is limiting; it increases the sense of difference between individuals and augments the desire for social distance by managers and co-workers.

Second, the union's perspective must include a systemic analysis. The individualization of problems obscures

Unions have a strong legacy defending the health and safety of their members from hazards at work.

of mental illness is limiting.

the impact that working conditions have on peoples' health. In effect, the worker is blamed for becoming unwell. Collective solutions to psychosocial hazards must be sought and, at the same time, accommodations and care must be provided to those in the workplace with diagnosed illnesses—and those suffering from anxiety in these pandemic times.

What do members need?

Stigma and discrimination against persons with mental health challenges is well documented. Unions must play a dual role of representing individual members who may be experiencing difficulty, while also trying to build solidarity among co-workers. This is not an easy task, but it can and must be done.

Members require accurate information about their rights under the collective agreement and relevant human rights legislation. This includes precise information about return to work provisions in situations where people require time away from the workplace.

Fortunately, during the last decade, many unions have instituted education programs about mental health that cover issues related to stigma and discrimination, in addition to courses on human rights and return to work. These programs teach stewards and activists to develop a skillset that helps them become more empathic in their dealings with union members who are experiencing difficulty. These same leadership skills can also be applied to building solidarity in a department—helping to avoid the interpersonal conflict that often occurs when a colleague is considered not to be pulling their weight.

In a related vein, I would argue that different union officials need to play distinct roles. People have different strengths. While some in union leadership may be responsible for assisting members and building support networks within their membership, union presidents or grievance officers will often be expected to challenge management assertively. This bulldog-like approach is valid and necessary in many labour relations situations, but it is not always the most helpful when dealing with members experiencing mental health challenges.

Finally, it must be noted that union perspectives on mental health are a work in progress and will evolve over time. My research shows promising practices across Canada by organizations including university faculty associations, autoworkers, community college staff, steelworkers, and those in the broader public sector. It may also be useful to note that a Mental Injury Toolkit has been developed through the efforts of unions and the Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers. This kit facilitates conversations between worker representatives and their employers to help identify problematic working conditions and toxic workplaces. This is a scientific, concrete set of tools that give reliable results for action without blaming individuals. While the path to dealing with mental health issues in the Academy may seem steep, progress is indeed being made. AM

Miriam Edelson is an independent researcher whose 2016 doctoral thesis for the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto was entitled "Mental Health in the Workplace: Unions' Role in Identifying and Combating Psychosocial Hazards." She worked as a human rights specialist in the labour movement for thirty years.

Mental health, grief, loss, and bereavement through COVID-19

COVID-19 has caused unexpected loss and interrupted the ways we cope and grieve. These experiences, compounded by physical distancing measures that intensify feelings of isolation, have negatively impacted our wellbeing. Grief can refer to any kind of loss, including the loss of financial security, physical and social connections, autonomy, and anticipated loss. When grief cannot be openly acknowledged, socially supported, and publicly mourned, it can deepen and prolong emotional pain.

Grief, loss, trauma, and bereavement require a deeply engaged attention to issues of equity, diversity and inclusion, and the need for cultural sensitivity when considering alternatives to rituals and traditions.

The following resources were compiled to respond to the evolving definition of grief and loss, particularly in light of the global pandemic, and show how we can support ourselves and each other.

The pixelated squares on this page are QR codes that you can scan with your phone to open each link. Simply use the camera app on your phone to focus on a QR code. Your phone should prompt you to open the link in your phone's web browser.

SUPPORTING OURSELVES AND EACH OTHER

Resource	Description	QR
Considering Grief in Mental Health Outcomes of COVID-19	The COVID-19 pandemic has created challenging circumstances for the physical and mental health of individuals around the world. This article addresses the role of grief in mental health outcomes relating to the pandemic.	
Fear, Loss, Social Isolation, and Incomplete Grief Due to COVID-19	The experience of the loss of relatives—one of the most stressful events in a person's life—has turned into a new challenge for survivors and mental health professionals during the coronavirus era.	
As COVID-19 Restrictions Lift, Grief Literacy Can Help Us Support Those Around Us	A shift is required for developing grief literacy in Canada and internationally. It must include addressing context-specific barriers and opportunities for change, generating more inclusive spaces for diverse responses to loss, and accepting grief as something normal that we all experience throughout life.	
Grief Triggers	This video addresses the phenomenon of grief triggers and how they can be handled in a school setting.	

ART

Resource	Description	QR
Art and Lockdown: Your Drawings in the Time of Coronavirus	Since the outbreak of the COVID-19, many have created art to express themselves and stay socially connected.	
Canadian Poets Try to Put the COVID-19 Pandemic into Words	49 poets from Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, B.C. and Atlantic Canada have contributed to Pandemic Poems, a new anthology that peels back the isolation, anxiety, and economic hardship of the COVID-19 pandemic and turns them into beautiful words.	
The Covid Art Museum	The world's first museum for art born during COVID-19 crisis.	
Storytelling and Poetry in the Time of Coronavirus	An exploration of why clinicians write as ways to support identification, catharsis, and a way to process experiences.	

EQUITY

Excess Deaths from COVID-19, Community Bereavement, and Restorative Justice for Communities of Color	Lives lost can never be replaced, yet healing and renewal are possible for those who remain, through acknowledgments of the harm created by centuries of injustice, commitments to rectifying past wrongs, and changes that restore all individuals and communities, but especially those that have lost the most, to a state of health and wholeness.
COVID-19 and Indigenous Health and Wellness	Indigenous scholars, practitioners, and learners wrote this report as a collection of stories to support an improved understanding about how COVID-19 is impacting the health and wellness of Indigenous peoples.
Common LGBT Grief Issues Following the Death of a Partner or Spouse	There is a difference between tolerance and respect so it may be difficult for those who are LGBTQS+ to access positive, consistent supports. It's important to understand why.
When Grief and Crises Intersect: Perspectives of a Black Physician in the Time of Two Pandemics	Along with the pain we all feel from the impact of COVID-19, this is the time to recognize that your Black colleagues, patients, and friends have been navigating another tenacious and far more destructive pandemic at the same time.

SUPPORTS

COVID-19 Discussion Forum	This online peer-to-peer discussion forum is a space to access and offer support, and to share experiences managing stress and anxiety related to the COVID-19 virus.
Hope for Wellness Help Line	The Hope for Wellness Help Line offers immediate mental health counselling and crisis intervention to all Indigenous peoples across Canada.
LGBTQ Grief Loss Support	A safe, caring place for LGBTQ people to grieve, share the loss of someone they love, and find support.

OTHER LINKS FROM THIS ISSUE

The National Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace	A set of voluntary guidelines, tools, and resources intended to guide Canadian organizations in promoting mental health and preventing psychological harm at work.
Good2talk	A province-wide, confidential, free service through which postsecondary students can receive support and local referral information on mental health, addictions, and wellbeing.
Mental Injury Toolkit	This guide and resource kit will provide workers with a basic understanding and a place to start to learn about workplace stress and what to do about it.

A WAY THROUGH

A Way Through is an online resource developed by Ameil Joseph (an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Social Sciences) and Shaila Kumbhare (a Ph.D. student in the School of Social Work) at McMaster University in collaboration with CMHA Hamilton. The project is designed to support Canadians in navigating online resources addressing grief in the time of COVID-19. Resources are curated and sorted to make finding helpful resources easier for front-line workers, educators, and everyone else. Many more resources are available at https://a-way-through.mcmaster.ca

Three Streams. Users can access content through three portals: supporting myself, supporting others, and memorial making.

Online Support. A list of online supports are also available. These include one-on-one therapy, peer-support groups, chat services, and more.

Community. Community members can share their stories of loss with the A Way Through team. These stories are added to the community tab. Sharing our stories can help remind us that we are not grieving alone, but as a community.

The shadowy business of international education

Nicholas Hune-Brown

Foreign students are lied to and exploited on every front. They're also propping up higher education as we know it.

This story originally appeared in The Walrus. It was written with the financial support of the OCUFA Fellowship in Higher Education Journalism.

Bibipur

The Singh Family home is a one-storey building of brick and cement on one of the main streets in Bibipur, a village of 1,000 in Punjab, northern India. The house has cracks in its walls and a roof of wood and mud that leaks during monsoon season. It was built about sixty years ago, and every decade or so since, whenever government workers have repaved the road outside the house, they've simply added another layer of asphalt on top of what was already there. Over time, the road has grown higher and higher, and the house has seemed to sink in contrast.

Kushandeep Singh was born here in 1999, and by the time he was a teenager, the house sat well below grade. Whenever it rained, water would stream in off the road and the family would rush to try to hold it back as best as they could with brooms and buckets.

Like just about everyone in Bibipur, the Singhs are farmers. The family owns a small plot—twelve acres of wheat and rice with a few cows and buffalo. On warm days as a child, Kushandeep would run off with his friends and bathe in the same pond the cows lolled around in. As landowners, the Singhs were far from the poorest in town, but they were a long way from wealthy. Fourteen people lived in the three-bedroom house: Kushandeep, his younger sister, and his parents in one room; one set of grandparents in another; and his uncle, aunt, and cousins in the third.

The family's biggest investment by far was Kushandeep. Most of the kids in his village learned while sitting on the floor of the local government school, but Kushandeep's father insisted on sending him to the nearest city, Patiala, to attend a private school with basketball courts and a cricket pitch and instruction in English. "My father never compromised on my education," says Kushandeep. The tuition alone cost almost a third of the family's income.

His father hired a rickshaw to ferry Kushandeep an hour to school each way, picking up other students en route. Over the years, on long rides down dusty highways, Kushandeep would sit back and watch the billboards float past—an ever-shifting window into the world outside Bibipur. When he was young, all the ads were for local restaurants and stores. As he grew older, billboards for multinationals like McDonald's followed. Finally, as Kushandeep neared the end of secondary school, a new product began to appear: postsecondary education in Canada.

A decade ago, few people in rural Punjab were thinking about schools in Canada. It was a cold, mysterious place that didn't hold much appeal. "But, in the past five or six years, it's become a hot topic," says Prithvi Raj, a student in India who was preparing to study overseas when he spoke with me. "Canadian education is being sold like hotcakes. You don't even have to sell it—people will just come and buy."

The product being advertised on billboards in Patiala is the same one that thousands of recruiters are hawking at education fairs in Beijing and private-school visits in Rio de Janeiro: a new version of the Canadian immigrant dream. The pitch is straightforward. First, get a student visa to study in Canada—the specific school doesn't particularly matter. After that, get a postgraduate work permit that lets you live and work in the country for up to three years. Then apply for permanent residency. When described by a seasoned recruiter, the process seems simple. Details about what to study, or the actual odds of becoming a permanent resident, aren't important. What's important is the idea that, if you run that gauntlet, you can build a life beyond anything you could dream of in a place like Bibipur. "Every student is going to these agents and saying, 'I want to go to Canada,'" says Kushandeep.

At eighteen, Kushandeep was a baby-faced teenager with big brown eyes and a thoughtful, earnest way of expressing himself. He did well in school, though not as well as some of the richer kids in his class. His English was improving, but he had never left the state, let alone the continent. He had one distant cousin on his father's side who had studied in British Columbia. But, as far as he knew, not a single person from his village had ever gone to school overseas. When Kushandeep did well on his English proficiency exams and education abroad began to seem like a real possibility, his family considered borrowing money from every relative and friend they knew. But the numbers didn't add up. For an international student, tuition at a Canadian school started at $20,000 a year, excluding the cost of living. In a good year, if the harvests went well, the Singh family earned about $9,000 in profit. Eventually, it was decided: the family would mortgage their farm.

Students like Kushandeep have complicated the usual picture of international study. The 2000s-era stereotype of the pampered young foreigner, usually from mainland China, who drives flashy sports cars and shops for Gucci bags between classes was always a caricature, but now it's entirely divorced from reality. In 2019, 34 per cent of the

The federal government brags that foreign students bring over $21 billion into the economy each year—more than auto parts, more than lumber.

more than 642,000 international students in Canada were from India, well ahead of China's 22 per cent.

Many of these students are from Punjab, and they generally attend small community colleges, not internationally renowned universities. A recent study by Rakshinder Kaur and Kamaljeet Singh, professors of education at Punjabi University Regional Centre, surveyed students attending an English-language training school in preparation to study abroad: 80 per cent came from farming families, most from small farms. When asked where they wanted to study, 78 per cent said Canada. Mortgaging land to cover tuition has become common, with more and more families literally selling the farm to send their children to community colleges.

These students are driving an international education industry that has exploded in recent years, their numbers tripling in the last decade. Today, Canada says it's the third most popular country for study in the world behind only the United States and Australia. In press releases and reports, the federal government brags that foreign students bring over $21 billion into the economy each year—more than auto parts, more than lumber. Those numbers are the result of a decade of careful nurturing, a triumph of salesmanship, and carefully calibrated government policies.

International students are also the product of a system that has blurred the lines between immigration and education in an unofficial, ad hoc arrangement meant to appeal to potential immigrants while avoiding any responsibility for their settlement. It's a system that is quietly transforming postsecondary institutions, which have grown dependent on fees from foreign students and therefore on the shadowy world of education agents who deliver them. And it's a system built on attracting teenagers like Kushandeep from small villages across the world, taking their money, and bringing them to campuses from small-town Nova Scotia to suburban BC with lofty promises for the future but little regard for what actually happens to them once they arrive.

The agents

When Kushandeep wanted to figure out how to begin a life in Canada, he did what everyone does: he went to an education agent.

These salespeople aren't difficult to track down in India. "You could find an agent shop on every corner, on every street, on every road," says Kushandeep. One agent I spoke with put their numbers in the tens of thousands in India alone, though there is no way to know the exact figure—it is a largely unregulated business, open to anyone.

Agents connect students like Kushandeep with postsecondary institutions overseas. They often find the school, complete the paperwork, and apply for the visa. Despite this, they're generally not paid by the students but by the institutions. Schools aren't often forthcoming about their commissions, but multiple agents told me that the industry standard is 15 to 20 per cent of a student's first year of tuition—a rate that can net them anywhere from $1,500 to $5,000 a head.

It's a commission the institutions are more than willing to pay since it will be recouped by an international tuition close to five times higher than domestic fees. Today, attracting overseas students is a financial imperative. The result is a booming secondary economy built on top of the international student market, with immigration consultants and recruiters mushrooming up around the world.

Mel Broitman can remember the business in its infancy. In the mid-1990s, when the former CBC journalist began his education-consultancy company with his lawyer friend Dani Zaretsky, the market in Canada was modest. He explains that China was sending a few thousand students a year. There was the odd European. "When we first started working, in '97, there were maybe 400 Indian students," Broitman says.

Broitman started building his business in Bangladesh, travelling to elite high schools and giving his little presentation about life in Canada. "It was sleepy times," he says. Over the next two decades, he watched the evolution of what's now a multibillion-dollar industry. In the early 2000s, he went to China—for decades the single biggest source of overseas

students—and saw a potential goldmine. Agents, he says, were double-charging, taking money from students as consultants and then taking commissions from the institutions. They were falsifying grades, faking English-proficiency tests—anything to get kids into a Canadian school. Broitman was appalled. He remembers calling up his partner and asking facetiously, "Dan, you want to make $3 million a year, cash? We only have to be a little bit crooked."

In 2011, Canada attracted 239,131 students. It was around this time that the federal government decided it needed to double that number in the next decade. In "International Education: a Key Driver of Canada's Future Prosperity," the 2012 report that would become the blueprint for the country's strategy, the authors urge the government to act quickly. "We believe Canada is facing a unique window of opportunity that requires coordination of our promotional efforts." These students, the report argues, are necessary to address skilled labour shortages and relieve demographic pressures as Canada's working population ages.

The factors that make Canadian education attractive to international students have little to do with the schools themselves and much more to do with the fact that Canada is an English-speaking country, it has a reputation for safety, and most importantly, it has tweaked its immigration policies. Canada allows students to work up to twenty hours a week off-campus—a necessity for indebted students like Kushandeep. Students are allowed to stay in the country and work for up to three years after graduation. During that time, they can also apply for permanent residency. Under the Express Entry program, students enter a pool with other prospective immigrants and are given points according to a number of criteria from language skills to education to work experience. The government selects those with the most points, the cut-off changing each selection period depending on who else applies.

Adjusting those two variables, the ability to work and the pathway to permanent residency (PR), is how governments try to control the flow of students. Create a more favourable path to PR—by, for example, assigning more points to those getting a Canadian degree, as Canada did in 2016—and you open the faucet wider. Restrict the ability to work postgraduation, as the UK did in 2010, and the market dries up.

Over the last decade, Canada has done its best to increase that flow. In 2019, 642,000 international students came to Canada—three times as many as when the 2012 report was drawn up. And, as the number of students has grown, the recruitment business has grown with it. Broitman claims that his company delivered some 6,300 students to the University of Windsor over fifteen years, worth approximately $400 million in tuition. But that figure is tiny compared to the behemoth agencies in China and India moving kids at volume. New Oriental, a publicly traded company out of Beijing that combines private education, English tutoring, and international recruitment, has a market cap of more than $17 billion.

According to Broitman, the economics of the system reveal a fundamental truth: a student who walks into an agent's shop is not the client—they're the product.

If an agent is getting commissions from an unremarkable community college in rural Ontario, then their only motivation is to get every teenager who walks through their door, no matter how brilliant or hopeless, to enroll in that one college. "That's how the business works," says Broitman. "You just direct people to where your bread is buttered."

The students I spoke with described fast-talking salespeople pitching an unrealistic vision of Canada and, in particular, of students' chances for permanent residency. "They push a lot," says Rajpreet Sohal, a student from India who studied at Lakehead University. "Even if a student is poor, they say, 'Don't worry, you can ask for money.'"

Sohal remembers visiting an agent who kept encouraging him to apply to small colleges in Canada despite his excellent grades and his desire to pursue graduate school. When Sohal eventually went to Lakehead University for a master's in mechanical engineering, he decided to become an international-student ambassador. There, he spoke with students from around the world, from Nigeria to Thailand, all of whom, he recalls, described the same agent behaviours in their home countries. Some had been pushed toward certain private schools that aren't eligible for postgraduate work permits. Others had been given false information about tuition fees. One student had boarded a plane after being told they were enrolled in one college only to arrive and find they hadn't actually been signed up. "This thing is getting nasty," says Sohal. "It's a dirty business."

Beyond the clear-cut instances of fraud, the entire system in Canada is built around the false premise that education, not work and immigration, is the primary aim for most students. According to a survey by the Canadian

The bottom line is

these kids are being set up for failure.

Bureau of International Education, 60 per cent of students intend to apply for permanent residency, a per centage that is likely far higher if you look solely at students attending community colleges. "Everybody knows it's just a pathway to PR," says Prithvi Raj. "That's what the government is encouraging. That's what the agents are selling. Any way you slice it, everybody is in on this."

If students want permanent residency, they need to pick an area of study that will eventually earn them enough points through Canada's Express Entry immigration system. It may be easy to get accepted into one community college's pastry chef program, but what are the odds of that degree turning into a "skilled labour" job that will lead to a future in Canada? For agents on the streets of Patiala, however, who have never been to the institutions they're representing and may have little knowledge of the intricacies of the Canadian immigration system, the incentive is simple: get every student, and their fees, into whatever program will accept them.

"What you see on the ground are a bunch of education agents who are absolutely taking advantage of your average consumer," says Earl Blaney, an immigration consultant and education agent who works in the Philippines and has been outspoken about abuses in the business. "The bottom line is these kids are being set up for failure, left and right, by these education agents overseas who don't know anything about the Canadian labour market and do not care."

The government doesn't release numbers on the per centage of students who apply for permanent residency and actually receive it. But Express Entry is a competitive process, with nineteen-year-old community college students entering the same pool as overseas doctors, French-speaking engineers, and married professionals with twice as much work experience. In 2015, Statistics Canada found that the "transition rate" for international students becoming permanent residents was between 20 and 27 per cent. If the vast majority of community college students from India are hoping for PR, the math isn't complicated: a lot of families who have wagered everything on a future in Canada are losing that bet.

In 2019, Broitman left the world of recruiting for good. "The problem with this business is there's so much money at stake," he says. Agents, he tells me, are only part of the problem. Universities and colleges are just as culpable.

The schools

When Kushandeep went to meet his education agent in Chandigarh, a bustling city a two-hour drive away, all he knew was that he wanted to study in British Columbia, the province where his distant cousin lived. The agent did the rest. Kushandeep, the man decided, should take a two-year business program. He directed him to a sprawling west-coast school that Kushandeep had never heard of: Kwantlen Polytechnic University.

KPU is a community-college-turned-polytechnic-university with 20,000 students spread out over five campuses across BC's Lower Mainland. It offers a huge selection of degrees, diplomas, and certificate programs from anthropology to appliance-servicing.

Over the last decade, the per centage of KPU's funding that comes from the government has dropped, as it has for most schools. Historically, colleges and universities received most of their funding through the province. Canada-wide, this share of total funding has fallen, from 38.6 per cent in the 2013–14 academic year to 35.4 per cent in 2018–19. Without much discussion, Canada's publicly funded institutions have ceased to receive most of their funding from the public. In 2015–16, for the first time since the 1950s, more than half of university and college revenues didn't come from the government.

That money is being replaced by students like Kushandeep. In 2007–08, KPU had just 525 international students. A decade later, it had 6,002 and was receiving so many applications that it had to temporarily shut down international enrolment. Those students were almost wholly responsible for the school's growth. In 2018, the university approved a 15 per cent increase on international student

tuition, bumping yearly fees up to nearly $20,000—four times higher than domestic rates. That year, the school posted a $22 million surplus.

Those numbers are extraordinary, but they're representative of the kind of growth seen at any number of otherwise unexceptional institutions. Today, international students are responsible for almost 40 per cent of all tuition fees across Canada. This year, when Sudbury's Laurentian University went bankrupt, industry watchers had one specific piece of criticism: the university hadn't worked as hard as its competitors to lure in students from abroad.

The biggest growth hasn't been at universities, however. It's been in smaller community colleges that offer the same path to a work permit and permanent residency with comparatively cheaper tuition and programs that can be completed in just two years. At Langara College, in Vancouver, international enrolment skyrocketed from just 968 students in 2010 to 4,728 a decade later. At Lambton College in Sarnia, Ontario, international students grew a whopping twelvefold between 2009 and 2019. That year, Lambton earned twice as much revenue from international students as it did from domestic students and government funding combined.

The international-student business has an institutional face in the Canadian Bureau for International Education, a nonprofit based in Ottawa. When the CBIE talks about this growth, it uses high-minded language about the benefits that come with these students. "I think, increasingly, over time, the work of international education is the stuff that binds us together," says president Larissa Bezo. "Part of that comes from the richness and the presence of international students on our Canadian campuses, where our Canadian students and domestic learners are exposed to the really rich depth of those individuals' lived experiences." The word institutions use to describe that process is internationalization—a term plastered across websites and accompanied by photos of smiling multicultural students. The students themselves have a different term for it: they say they're being used as cash cows.

As universities and colleges have become dependent on international students, their relationships with agents and consultants overseas have come under scrutiny. The institutions I spoke with all described a careful vetting process for their agents. Brad Van Dam of Langara College says his institution rejects dozens of new agents a year who want to work with Langara but aren't up to its standards.

KPU works with approximately 100 agents around the world, according to Carole St. Laurent, associate vice-president of KPU International. "We get three solid [employment] referrals. And then we sign a one-year contract," she says, adding that the school takes complaints from students about agent behaviour extremely seriously and has had to dismiss agents in the past.

But some agents say schools benefit from a system that's far more freewheeling, with little to no oversight from the institutions ostensibly managing hundreds of recruiters from an ocean away. And the problem isn't limited to Canada. In Australia, a 2019 parliamentary inquiry found that "international students were vulnerable, open to exploitation by unscrupulous education agents, and a lack of regulation enabled [agents] to operate without any consequences for their actions." In 2016, after discovering that hundreds of agents in India were submitting fraudulent documents, New Zealand began cracking down on overseas recruiters. Both countries have tried to introduce legislation to protect international students. In Canada, Manitoba is the only province with specific legislation to regulate overseas recruiters. In the rest of the country, it seems, anything goes.

"The whole system is all messed up," says Gautham Kolluri, an Indian-born former international student who worked as a recruiter for Mohawk College and Conestoga College before starting his own consulting business.

In the last few years, Kolluri has seen a troubling new trend—the rise of "aggregator recruiters" who bring the lessons and funding of Silicon Valley to the world of postsecondary education. These venture capital-backed companies work on a simple, disruptive model: sign up thousands of agents and hundreds of colleges and universities, then act as the go-between, making it easier and cheaper than ever for institutions to sign up students at scale.

One of the largest players in this industry is ApplyBoard, a Canadian startup founded in 2015 by three Iranian-born brothers, former international students themselves. Meti Basiri, one of the cofounders, says there are plenty of reasons companies like his are attractive to institutions. "Universities don't have the resources to go to every single village or smaller and bigger cities of India," says Basiri. ApplyBoard, meanwhile, has thousands of recruiters across the country, meaning schools no longer have to do the expensive, time-

intensive work of managing their own agents. Institutions just sign up, and ApplyBoard will funnel in all the students they need. According to Basiri, one out of five Indian students in Canada arrived through ApplyBoard agents.

According to critics, aggregate recruiters allow institutions to avoid any accountability for the actions of the agents representing them. "It eliminates the link between the colleges themselves and the agents," says agent Earl Blaney. "The schools are now not even responsible or connected to these agents, but they're the ones selling the school." It's a $21 billion dollar industry, he says, with hardly any rules.

ApplyBoard says it vets all its recruiters, rejecting 46 per cent of applicants. Approved agents are then trained through online webinars and an interactive course. But institutions seem to understand the potential for abuse that comes with working through aggregators. In the past, Langara refused to allow its agents to work with subagents. "The reason for that is because then we lose the control of who these people are, how they're representing the institution," says Van Dam. Last year, despite those qualms, Langara signed an agreement to work with ApplyBoard in what Van Dam describes as a trial period. In theory, there's nothing stopping an agent that Van Dam rejected yesterday from signing up with ApplyBoard and sending kids to the college soon afterward.

KPU also recently signed up with the company, as did hundreds of other Canadian institutions that may have once had similar misgivings, from Western University, the University of Manitoba, and Acadia University to colleges like Medicine Hat College and Loyalist College. "A lot of schools want international students," explains Basiri. "And some of the schools want international students fast."

"The whole business has become student-trafficking," says Kolluri. A few years ago, he went back to Punjab, where he was born, and saw shopping malls full of fly-by-night agencies selling Canadian education. It's clear that the business was creating a lot of winners. "The losing side is international students," says Kolluri. "If they don't get the correct guidance, their whole life is messed up."

Work

The day Kushandeep left Bibipur, the entire village lined the streets to see him off. People he'd never even met came out to wish him well, to give him ten or fifteen rupees and implore him to remember them when he made it to Canada. "It felt like I'd already accomplished something," he says.

By the time he landed in Vancouver, on December 11, 2017, after a two-day journey, he felt much less assured. His distant cousin, the one person he knew on the continent, picked him up at the airport and drove him out to a basement apartment in Surrey, leaving him with three strangers—his new roommates.

That first month, Kushandeep had never felt more lonely in his life. Surrey was cold, his roommates were constantly working, and life in Canada was expensive. He was paying $400 a month for his portion of the apartment, where he shared a queen mattress with one of his new roommates. His bus pass was $50, groceries another $200. When classes began, he enjoyed them. But his classroom experience was only a tiny part of his new life: before he could even worry about school, he needed to find a job.

Kushandeep dropped his resume everywhere, finally landing employment at a home-fixtures manufacturer. The owner was Indian-born, also from Punjab, and he hired Kushandeep over the phone, no questions asked. "He told me, 'I will see you for a month and see how you work, then I will decide how much I want to pay you,'" Kushandeep remembers.

For a month, Kushandeep loaded and unloaded vans. He lugged heavy sheets of plywood. "I was just like a donkey who was just putting loads from one place to another," he says. At the end of his trial period, after Kushandeep had worked over eighty hours, the owner gave him $600—a rate that worked out to just shy of half of minimum wage.

Over the following months, Kushandeep's boss insisted on paying him per day rather than hourly. Knowing that Kushandeep's visa had strict rules about the number of hours he could work each week, his boss would often bring him out in the van for day-long jobs. "He knew I couldn't take the pay," he says. "But they used to say you have to do work or you lose your job."

His situation was hardly unique. The growing body of international students has created a massive labour force ripe for exploitation. "We call them migrant students, not international students," says Sarom Rho, an organizer with Migrant Students United, an offshoot of the advocacy group Migrant Workers Alliance for Change. Like other migrants, from farm workers to care workers, international students

The growing body of international students has created a massive labour force ripe for exploitation.

are defined by their precarity. "What having temporary status means is that power is taken away from us," says Rho. "We have less access to basic rights and protections, including labour protections. Employers have all the power."

Rho has spoken with countless students who report being taken advantage of by their bosses. "We were hearing about students working in cleaning and restaurant jobs for far below minimum wage. Employers not paying their wages on time or at all."

Students can work only twenty hours off campus a week, by law. That rule is, in theory, supposed to discourage those who want to come to Canada simply to make money. In reality, students desperate to pay rent often end up working under the table. And, once they're working illegally, they're at the mercy of their employers.

Sunanda (whose name has been changed to protect her privacy) was eighteen when she arrived at Langara College. After losing her job at Walmart, she took a job at a restaurant in Vancouver. "They were winking at me, always telling me that, if I want to meet a famous Punjabi singer, they can help me, and they can give me more money," says Sunanda. "Once, my bosses took me to a building in Surrey," she remembers. "They offered to pay all my fees, I just have to live with them."

Her employers never directly asked for sex, but Sunanda knew what they were suggesting. She was already depressed and anxious, and their insinuations took a profound toll. She knew other students who'd been harassed and sexually exploited by bosses. She quit a few days later, never going back to the restaurant. "I'm from a very small village. I had never experienced this," she says. "It was mental torture."

Puneet Dhillon, an analyst at the Brampton location of Punjabi Community Health Services, says young female students often arrive in Canada without any support. They lack knowledge of the legal system and have no financial safety net. "All that makes them more vulnerable to any form of sexual exploitation than any other members of the community," says Dhillon.

For Kushandeep, nearly eight months of being paid below minimum wage was all he could take. He quit, eventually finding work at another manufacturing company that agreed to pay him minimum wage.

He began work a few days later, in early December of 2018. During winter vacations, when schools are closed, international students are allowed to work full-time, and Kushandeep was eager to get as many hours as he could. Like at his previous job, he says, his new employer hadn't given him any training or made him sign any employment papers. There were no official breaks, and he found himself pushing through exhaustion.

On January 3, he was loading a van with an enormous mirror when it broke in his hands. He felt the sharp edge flick across his wrist. Then he couldn't feel his hand at all. When Kushandeep looked down, the cut was gruesome: a U-shaped gash that had sliced through the sinews, cutting right down to the bone. He says a coworker rushed over to see if he was okay and then immediately got on the phone—not to the paramedics but to their boss. He came back with instructions: Put him in a van and take him to emergency and say he got hurt at home.

Kushandeep staggered out of the shop, bleeding profusely, and passersby eventually called an ambulance. When he woke up, he was in the hospital. The doctors told him the cut had severed his nerves and tendons. His artery had also been damaged. There was a fifty-fifty chance he would never use his hand again.

That night, Kushandeep spoke to his boss. "He didn't ask how I was," Kushandeep remembers. The next day, he says, his boss explained that he didn't have insurance and Kushandeep wasn't covered. If Kushandeep told authorities he was hurt on the job, the man said, it would mean trouble for everyone.

When the worker's compensation board called, Kushandeep told them the truth about what had happened. After that, things changed. Kushandeep says his employer refused to pay his hours on the job; when worker's compen-

sation interviewed the boss, he told them Kushandeep was a stranger who was trying to blackmail him. "He knew that I had no family here in Canada," says Kushandeep. "Who would be guiding me? I had no resources."

After the accident, Kushandeep fell into a depression. He ignored his parents' calls for weeks; he couldn't bear to tell them what had happened. He tried speaking with his school about how he was feeling, but it seemed like there was no way for them to help him. He didn't know if his insurance claim would go through, and as a temporary worker in this country, he had no recourse to disability. "Who would pay my rent? Who would get my groceries?" he wondered. He knew his English wasn't good enough to get a customer-facing job. "I was just a hard worker. I could lift heavy things. But, if I was without that, I would have no more options."

Failing in Canada was unthinkable. It would mean returning to India with tens of thousands of dollars of debt. It would mean losing the farm, destroying not just his future but his entire family's as well. "I was really scared," says Kushandeep. "I used to think that, if my hand never started to work, I would commit suicide."

Consequences

About three years ago, Kamal Bhardwaj began to notice a disturbing trend. The British-born fifty-three-year-old is a prominent member of the South Asian community and the owner of a pair of funeral homes in Brampton and Toronto. He's someone Indian Canadians know to call when they need a "ship out"—someone to prepare a body for transfer overseas. Dealing with tragedy is his business. But, when Bhardwaj began seeing more and more young people showing up at his funeral homes, it gave him pause.

"When international students pass away, people contact us," says Bhardwaj. He was hearing from landlords, from the deceased's classmates, and from distant relatives. Bhardwaj says the cause of death isn't always shared with him. "But sometimes it's quite obvious," he says. "There are ligature marks on the neck. Those are the easy ones to know. Other cases, it could be drug overdose, drug related, and so forth. But we know that a per centage of those will be suicide." For the last few years, Bhardwaj says, he's been getting several such cases each month.

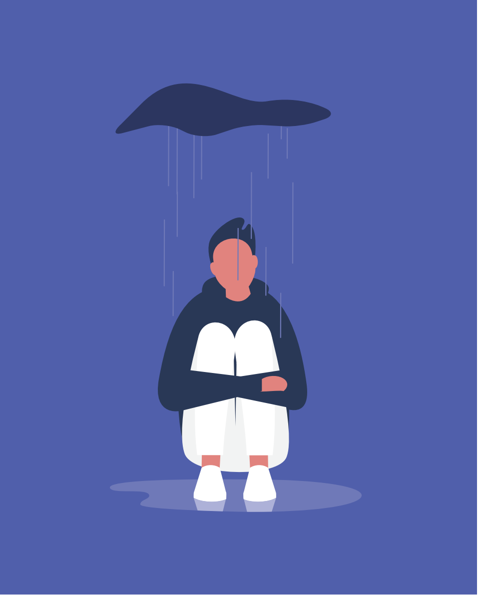
Shivendra Dwivedi, an anesthesiologist and the president of Canada India Global Forum, says that, last year, during an informal lunch he was hosting, the high commissioner of India to Canada told him that he was concerned about the rise in suicides. According to the High Commission's official numbers, seven international students took their own lives in 2020. But those numbers show only part of the problem, says Dwivedi. The taboo around suicide and mental illness in Indian culture means that other deaths are kept quiet. "If there is a suicide, many families tend to hide it," he says.

When he first noticed these deaths, Bhardwaj got in touch with the Punjabi Community Health Centre in the Peel region, a suburb of Toronto with a large South Asian population. Together, Bhardwaj and the PCHC decided to launch a new support group, Sunoh. Anupma Cvejic, CEO of the PCHC, wants the group to partner with Canadian universities to let students know there's help for them. Ultimately, though, she knows she needs to reach students before they arrive. "We want to have these conversations with students before they even apply," she says. "They're being told all these fake promises and fake dreams that are shattered the moment they get here. Their first experience here is of abandonment, of isolation and loneliness."

There are countless reasons an international student may suffer serious mental health issues, but for Cvejic and Bhardwaj, it was clear that the immense pressure students face in a foreign country is one of them. The smallest mistakes here—something that would be inconsequential for a Canadian student—can have devastating repercussions. Not remembering to sign up for a course, changing your program, failing a class, working too many hours—all can result in study permit problems. At worst, they can even lead to deportation.

In 2018, twenty-five students at St. Clair College, a small school in Windsor, Ontario, were denied their post-graduate work permits when a course they were taking, which they believed to be part of their business management program, was deemed ineligible by the government. Without their permits, they would be forced to leave the country. The students described feeling sick with the news, unable to sleep or eat. "I'm broken and I'm very upset," one told the CBC. Shortly afterward, another of the students, Ajesh Chopra, died by suicide.

The fundamental way the system is set up ignores the reality of the pressures these students face.



In late May 2021, news of another suicide broke. The information on the GoFundMe page asking for donations laid out the barest of details, but the outlines were familiar. Lovepreet Singh had come to Canada in 2018 to study at Centennial College. He came from a very poor family in the village of Charik, in Punjab, and was "stressed about his situation since last year due to financial and immigration problems." Singh had dropped out of Centennial and was living on the streets. He took his own life by jumping in front of a train.

According to Daljeet Kaur, a family friend and former international student herself, Singh's parents had sold their farm. "They're $70,000 in debt," she explained. The money being raised in the group wasn't to return his body, which was not fit to be transported. It was for a funeral and to help his parents.

In recent years, there is some evidence that schools have started to recognize the gravity of the problem on campuses: some have rolled out peer support groups, others have brought in counselling in students' first languages. But the fundamental way the system is set up ignores the reality of the pressures these students face. Community colleges and even large universities aren't equipped to manage an immigration settlement program for teenagers. They'd rather think of themselves as institutions of higher learning, not convenient waystations for young people in search of better lives. "It's wilful denial," says Earl Blaney. "Purposeful denial. They don't want to be responsible."

The new Canadian dream

In the weeks after his accident, his dominant hand still bandaged and useless, Kushandeep spent a lot of time praying at the gurdwara near his apartment. There, he saw a poster for a support group targeted at international students, One Voice Canada, which was holding a meeting at the temple.

The meeting, with more than 100 people filling the gurdwara, was eye opening. "It's not just me," Kushandeep realized. "We leave our parents, we leave our home country. Our families spend all their resources on us just for us to have a good future here. That's a lot of pressure on your brain. An eighteen- or nineteen-year-old brain is not a brain that can handle all of that."

The organization, formed by concerned members of BC's South Asian community, helped Kushandeep fight his employer. They made sure his insurance claim went through and he was able to receive compensation for his hours worked as well as the time he had to take off due to his injury. Kushandeep couldn't work for nearly a year, but slowly, his hand healed back almost to what it was.

When I first spoke with him, in the fall of 2019, Kushandeep was finishing off the final three credits of his two-year program at KPU. He was working again, still living in Surrey, and trying to make sense of the long road to permanent residency still before him.

In the time since, the world has turned upside down. The pandemic wreaked havoc on international education, leaving some students stranded in Canada and others stuck overseas, paying premium prices for middle-of-the-night Zoom tutorials. With travel restricted, enrolment plummeted. The Canadian government responded with various enticements to keep the students flowing, introducing a two-stage admissions process to encourage students to begin their studies online and tweaking postgraduate work-permit eligibility to allow those studying abroad virtually to qualify later. Despite that, colleges and universities saw losses.

For the students and former students who were already in the country, the lockdowns brought new hardships. In the Peel region, volunteer groups popped up to deliver free meals to the many who had lost their jobs. Others lost the "skilled labour" employment that might have led to a permanent spot in Canada and instead found jobs as essential workers. "We know current and former international students who are working overnight in

If the country is willing to allow hybrid virtual teaching models, removing class-size limitations, the potential is limitless.

grocery stores," says Sarom Rho. "The warehouses in Peel region and Scarborough are filled with international students." Sunanda, the young woman who quit her restaurant job after fearing sexual harassment, eventually dropped out of school. During the pandemic, she worked as a security guard at an Amazon fulfillment centre.

But, despite the pandemic slump in the international-student market, those who know the industry best are betting on it returning stronger than ever. In June, ApplyBoard finished its latest round of funding, raising $375 million, which values the company at more than $3 billion (US). Cofounder Meti is confident that Canada will remain a big draw for students in the semesters to come. If anything, he says, it could soon be even bigger: if the country is willing to allow hybrid virtual teaching models, removing class-size limitations, the potential is limitless. "Canada can double up their international numbers in the next three years," he says.

For Kushandeep, the pandemic has proven a boon. When I spoke with him in the spring, as vaccines rolled out across the country, he was living in Winnipeg. Manitoba needed workers, and he had been happy to oblige.

Now a KPU graduate with a three-year work permit, he was making cabinets on an assembly line (a skilled trade, according to the government, putting him in a good position for permanent residency). Life, he told me, was mostly good. He was living in a shared house on the outer limits of the city and earning $18.50 an hour—enough to send money home on occasion. He was working from 7 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. every day, then driving for Uber until he was exhausted. He was determined to do whatever it takes to buy his family's land back. His coworkers were kind Canadian-born men his father's age. "They think of me as a kid," he said. The other weekend, on one of the first warm Sundays of the year, they took him out to a golf course, showing him how a lefty holds a club.

Kushandeep, in some ways, could be seen as proof that the system is working as it should. After all, immigration has always been difficult; people have always found ways to make money facilitating it; why not postsecondary institutions? In this light, it's a win-win-win story: a college gets tuition, a Winnipeg cabinet manufacturer gets a worker, and Kushandeep gets a shot at life in a country he'd have had no chance of immigrating to any other way.

In a few months, he'll have completed a year of skilled work in Canada, and he plans to apply for PR. And, this year, because the pandemic has slowed other forms of immigration, graduates like him have been given extra spots to help Canada hit its quota. It has never been easier for an international student to immigrate. The dream of a permanent home here seems well within Kushandeep's grasp.

On the phone from Winnipeg one evening, he talked about his plans for the future. The first thing he would do, of course, was pay his family back. But, after that, who knows? Cabinetmaking wasn't something he'd ever thought about before, but he liked it. More than that, he was good at it. Maybe one day he'd own his own business.

He warmed up as he spoke, spinning out a vision of the future. "By that point, maybe I will be married," he said. He wouldn't stay in Winnipeg—the Sikh community, like the city itself, felt too small, and the weather was awful—but maybe he could find a job back in BC. Most of all, Kushandeep wanted to bring his parents here. "They deserve it," he said. "I want to show them the world outside their village."

None of it would be easy, but Kushandeep was determined. And he'd already come so far. "I'm the first kid from my village in Canada," he said.

It was an appealing vision—a twenty-first-century version of the immigrant dream. It's the kind of story that travels, carrying the promise of a better future. It's something you could sell on a billboard. AM

Nicholas Hune-Brown is a Toronto-based magazine writer whose work has appeared in Toronto Life, Slate, The Walrus, The Guardian, *and other publications. He's the winner of multiple National Magazine Awards and is the features editor of* The Local.

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