

Mediating Contagion

International students negotiating media, policy, and institutional responses to COVID-19

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Credit: Maya Rodrigo-Abdi, *The Ubysssey*



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Abstract:

The COVID-19 pandemic and increasing political tensions between Western states and China has intensified anti-Chinese and anti-Asian racism in the West. The pandemic has also left many students more vulnerable due to job losses and economic recession. Asian international students are at a unique position between these two poles of existence as there are typically less financial and legal supports available to them. As such, this project examines their experiences attending York University and the University of British Columbia during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I conducted focus group interviews and transcribed the recordings from it, as well as created a corpus of both universities' statements regarding COVID-19 and media coverage of these statements.

Approach:

Focus groups

- Recruited research participants from social media (i.e. Facebook, Instagram, Weibo, WeChat) and personal circles
- Conducted focus group interviews via Zoom
- Transcribed interview recordings ad verbum

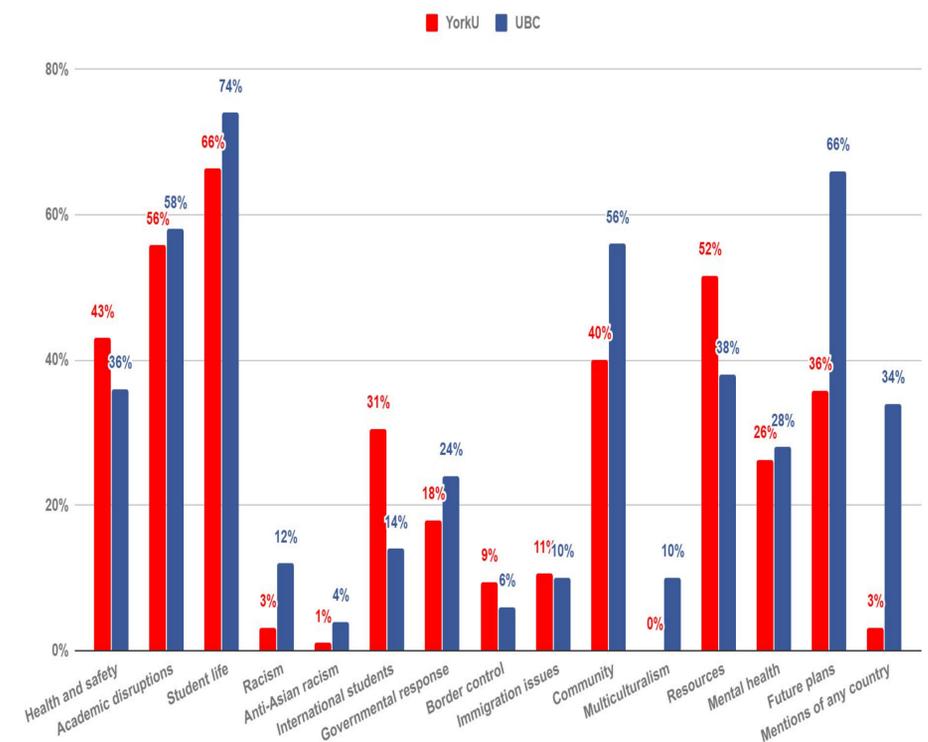
Institutional responses to COVID-19

- Collected statements and announcements from YorkU and UBC's websites
- Created themes to tag the statements with in order to see what the universities were addressing

Media coverage of universities' statements

- Created Google alerts for keywords, e.g. "COVID 19 YorkU", "Coronavirus UBC"
- Compiled related articles from a wide variety of sources, such as national newspapers, local newspapers, and even student newspapers

Themes in YorkU and UBC statements



| | YorkU | UBC |
|---|---|---|
| First statement | 11 March 2020 | 28 January 2020 |
| Total statements | 95 | 50 |
| Main people delivering statements | Vice-Provost Students: 20/95 (20.05%) President and Vice Chancellor: 19/95 (20.00%) University Registrar: 14/95 (14.74%) | President and Vice Chancellor: 35/50 (70.00%) Provost Vice President Academic UBC Vancouver: 8/50 (16.00%) Vice President of Human Resource: 8/50 (16.00%) |
| Top 5 themes addressed (descending order) | 1. Student life 2. Academic disruptions 3. Resources 4. Health and safety 5. Community | 1. Student life 2. Future plans 3. Academic disruptions 4. Community 5. Resources |
| Messages involving international students | 29/95 (30.53%) | 7/50 (14.00%) |
| Messages involving racism | 3/95 (3.16%) | 6/50 (12.00%) |

Conclusion:

Although both institutions placed great emphasis on a sense of "community" in their messages, the lack of attention they paid to anti-Asian racism and international students during the COVID-19 pandemic is unsurprising, as this merely follows past trends under normal circumstances and is a reflection of present political tensions between Western powers and China.

Canadian policymakers and university officials must make more of a serious effort in addressing and confronting these issues by increasing material support through financial and legal means.