

VOICE 4 Policy Analysis: Executive Summary

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INTRODUCTION

The VOICE project started on the UBC Okanagan (UBCO) campus in 2006 as a Campus Health initiative. The primary goal of VOICE is to facilitate and promote healthy living on the UBCO campus through the development and design of a health-promoting campus. All of the studies conducted within the VOICE project are guided by Community-Based Participatory Action Research (CBPAR) methods, health promotion strategies, and student and non-student partnerships (Budgen et. al., 2011). VOICE 4 is the fourth study in this longitudinal campus health research program (VOICE Campus Health Project, 2016). The purpose of VOICE 4 is to explore the influence of campus environments (social, physical, financial, organizational, cultural, spiritual, academic, historical, policy, etc.) on the mental wellbeing of students, staff, and faculty, and to identify system-level strategies for enhancing mental wellbeing. In addition, an objective within VOICE 4 was to develop a process and framework for policy identification and analysis, and to pilot its use.

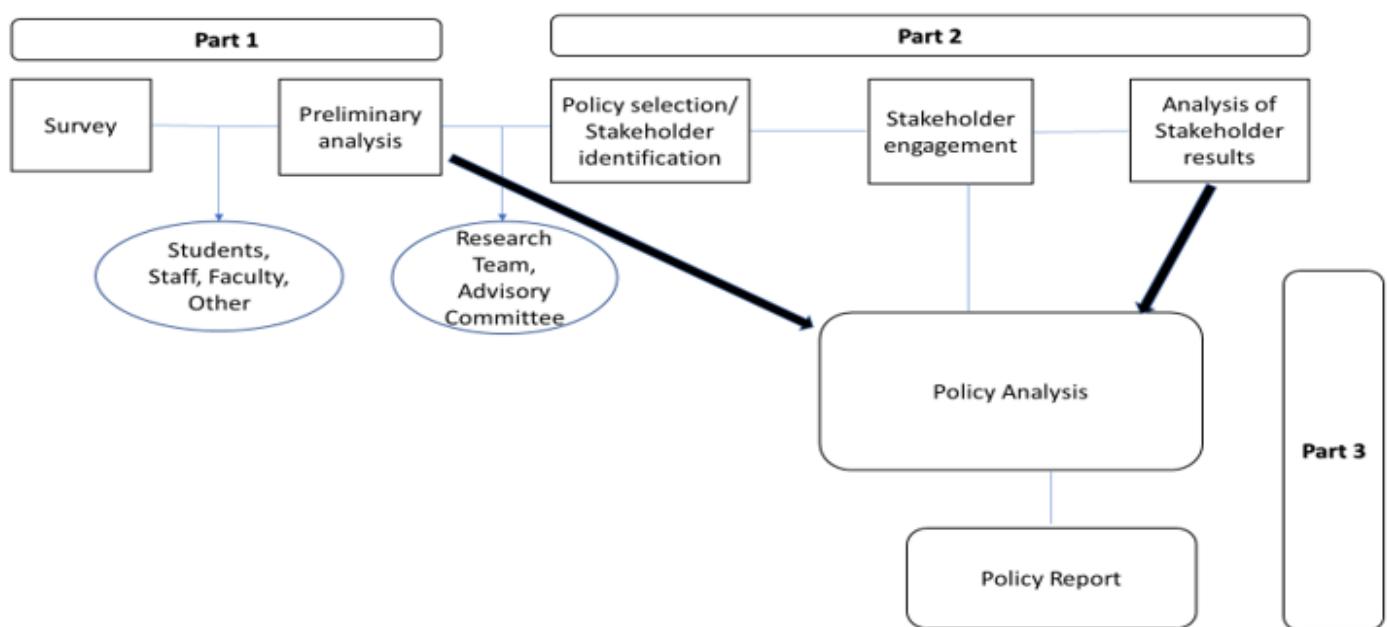
METHODS

In line with the VOICE methodological framework, CBPAR methods guided the policy identification and analysis along with two policy frameworks: the National Collaborative Center for Health Public Policy Framework for analysing public policy (National Collaborative Center for Health Public Policy, 2012) and the UBC Senate Framework for Mental Wellbeing of Students (Senate Ad Hoc Committee on Student Mental Health and Wellbeing, 2014). These frameworks were selected because they are flexible, easy to understand, and feasible given the overall goals of the VOICE 4 project.

A three-part process guided policy identification and analysis activities (see Figure 1). First, responses from students, faculty, and staff via VOICE 4 data collection methods (questionnaire, interviews, photovoice, story capture booths) were used to identify issues that were important to the UBCO campus community and their associated policies. Second, the VOICE 4 Research Advisory Committee reviewed preliminary findings and based on this review recommended key campus stakeholders to be interviewed to gather further data on two policies. Key stakeholder selection was based on experience in the identified policy area and included individuals from different departments or schools, faculties, and administrative units. A semi-structured interview guide was developed and 10 key campus stakeholders were interviewed. Stakeholders were asked to comment on the objective of selected policies, implementation challenges they faced, and alternative ways to achieve the objective of the policy. Detailed notes and audio recordings of interviews were

reviewed and a content analysis completed. In the third phase, all data were compared and contrasted, along with related policies and practices at UBC Vancouver and selected other Canadian universities to identify possible policy and practice alternatives. This analysis was guided by a “Health in all policies” lens, an approach to public policy that “systematically considers the health implications of decisions, seeks synergies, and avoids harmful health impacts to improve population health and health equity” (World Health Organization, 2013) as well as the principles of the UBC Senate Framework for Mental Wellbeing of Students (flexibility, inclusiveness, and accessibility) (Senate Ad Hoc Committee on Student Mental Health and Wellbeing, 2014). The most student friendly and workable alternatives were identified.

Figure 1: VOICE 4 Policy Identification/Analysis Process:



FINDINGS

VOICE 4 results indicated that several components of the academic environment were hindering to mental wellbeing. Students linked their stress to curriculum issues, exams, classroom physical space, the support provided by professors, program structure, and workload. In particular, students raised issues related to the 3-in-24 exam policy, reading break, mid-term exam scheduling, doctor's note requirements, and practices related to missed midterm/final exams. Two UBCO policies were identified as directly related to the issues raised by the respondents: Examination Hardship policy and the Academic Concession policy (University of British Columbia, 2017a, 2017b).

Policy 1: Examination Hardship

Examination hardship is defined as “the occurrence of an examination candidate being faced with three or more formal examination scheduled within 24-hour period (example from 8am to 7:59am)” (UBC, 2017b). The purpose of this policy is to reduce exam-related stress by preventing students from writing three exams in a day. A student in such a situation is expected to notify their instructor not later than one month ahead of winter examination and not later than two weeks ahead of summer examination, to reschedule the examination for the student.

VOICE 4 student respondents were clear that exams were a major source of stress, especially when they had to write more than one exam in a day or when they were scheduled multiple days in a row. For example, one undergraduate student stated: “Exam schedules are brutal. Last semester had 6 exams in 1 week and could not get them rescheduled” (UG R23). Though students were united in their responses, stakeholders were divided on this subject. Some agreed with the concerns students raised, and advocated that the time difference between examinations should be at least 24 hours. This, in their opinion, allowed for enough rest and study before a student writes a second exam. Others posited that it was normal for a student to write two exams in a day. They believed students need to be more resilient and better managers of their time. These two groups, however, agreed that current exam scheduling practices were due to the limited space on campus and the fixed period for examination. Stakeholders presented four options: 1) continue with established exam scheduling practices; 2) make examination schedules available at the time of registration; 3) match classroom schedules to examination schedules; and 4) adopt the exam scheduling practice of UBC Vancouver (UBC, 2016).

The options were reviewed to determine which would be feasible and be most likely to address student issues related to exam scheduling. Key stakeholder interviews indicated that adopting the exam scheduling practices at UBC Vancouver in the short to medium term may be a relatively straightforward process and would alleviate the logistical pressures at the UBCO campus. This would entail reducing the length of exams from 3 hours to 2.5 hours and increasing the number of exam timeslots from 3 slots to 4 slots per day. This option would provide UBCO with an additional 6 slots per week to space out exams. However, UBCO could also explore the option of providing exam schedules at time of registration, which would enable students to better plan their academic workload and exam preparation.

Policy 2: Academic Concession

Academic concession underscores the conditions and procedures that a student should undergo if the student misses an examination or withdraws from an entire course or program. It is admissible when a student faces a circumstance that hinders his/her ability to undertake an examination or a program. A student of UBCO is permitted to apply for concession on two main grounds: conflicting responsibilities or unforeseen events (UBC, 2017a).

Both VOICE 4 student respondents and key stakeholders expressed concerns about the lack of clarity on the interpretation of the policy across campus, its bureaucratic and

administrative centred nature, and its lack of flexibility in meeting the concerns of students. For example, one stakeholder provided this comment regarding implications of the policy for withdrawals, "This one is definitely a problem...and I definitely want to see a change in this policy ...I don't think I get a really good answer when I ask people about why we have it. I think some of the rational for having such a tight withdrawal date, I don't know if it is a financial decision on the part of the university or one time it was round academic performance but I'm like, do we really care? Why don't we push the withdrawal date or maybe there shouldn't be one? ...I would love to see a softer withdrawal date so that a student can self-withdraw" (ID#2).

Three competing values related to academic concession were identified through the key stakeholder interviews: the importance of being student-centered, protecting the standard of UBC, and protecting UBC's budget. The stakeholders also proposed three solutions to the academic concession policy: maintain the policy, amend the policy, or abolish the policy. These proposed options were compared to practices in other universities (University of Lethbridge, 2017; University of Toronto, 2017).

Based on a review of these options and in light of the data collected, introducing a late withdrawal policy to allow greater flexibility and student autonomy over his/her education may be an appropriate option for UBCO. The late withdrawal policy could require that a student forfeits the option of tuition reimbursement after week 4. This is in line with existing practices at UBC and other universities across Canada, and guarantees the integrity of the budget and the financial commitments of the University. It also maintains the standards of UBC.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the policy analysis revealed ways in which two policies may be revised at UBCO to address student concerns and contribute to creating an academic environment that supports student wellbeing. Next steps involved sharing these results with students and stakeholders on campus to promote further discussion of issues related to these policies and develop strategies for addressing the need for policy change. In addition, the process developed and used for policy identification proved useful and assisted in identifying policies most in need of analysis. Thus, the framework used in this policy analysis provided a useful guide for continuing this work in the VOICE 4 project.

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