



# Designing Equity in Student Mental Health: Strategies for Postsecondary Institutions




The research report explores the best standards in equity in mental health and identifies the best practices in equity design and implementation in services and supports for postsecondary students. These standards and practices are used to comparatively analyze the mental health interventions in three varying Ontario universities. Based on the findings, the report recommends an equity strategy that postsecondary institutions can adapt to their institutional needs in post-COVID-19 pandemic planning

## EQUITY, MENTAL HEALTH & POSTSECONDARY STUDENTS


The research aim was to explore how postsecondary institutions in Ontario can best meet the mental health needs of their diverse and marginalized students in the shifting post-pandemic mental health landscape. The research goals were to:

### Equity in Mental Health



Identify the common themes and best practices that are used in the integration of equity into postsecondary mental health interventions

### Ontario Universities & Colleges



Assess the integration of equity in mental health services and supports of three Ontario universities during the COVID-19 pandemic

## PROFILE: Ontario Postsecondary Student

**14%**  
International students in Ontario; enrolment increasing at higher rate than domestic students <sup>1</sup>

**24%**  
Students reported depression <sup>2</sup> impacting academic performance

**75%**  
Mental health struggles appear before the age of 25 in Canadian young adults <sup>3</sup>


Postsecondary students are a high risk population for mental health struggles and substance use. Student debt and the challenge of securing housing strongly impacts student mental health and safety. Students were facing barriers in accessing services and supports before the pandemic. The pandemic has introduced significant stressors in social isolation and challenges in remote learning

Marginalized students face unique barriers when accessing mental health services such as: language barriers, remote geographic location, lack of service offerings that follow cultural safety principles, and lack of support offerings outside of the Western medical model, such as Indigenous world views

Sources:  
1. Best Practices in Canadian Higher Education, 2020: Transitioning to Remote Health and Wellness Services in Post-Secondary Settings: A Case Study Approach, Toronto, ON  
2. American College Health Association, (2019). National College Health Association - National College Health Assessment II: Canadian Reference Group Data Spring 2019. Silver Spring, MD.  
3. Ontario's Universities, (2017). Partnering for a Better Future for Ontario.


## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### SCOPING REVIEW




The JBI Scoping Review methodology was used, to ask the question: "What types of equity strategies and priorities have appeared in mental health services and supports serving student populations in Ontario?" Research was carried out in four health databases and four social science databases in the Humber College Library collection for peer reviewed English articles. Grey literature was carried out in internet searches on official reports, guides, frameworks, and webinars by established organizations

### ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN




The grey literature scan included searches of reports, guides, articles, and webinars from established organizations in Ontario. The general internet search used a combination of terms based on the findings in the literature review. The targeted internet search reviewed four organizations that are established leaders in the mental health space in Ontario. Information was extracted and thematically organized. Microsoft Excel 2016 spreadsheets for data entry and analysis

### COMPARITIVE ANALYSIS




Three universities were chosen based on the variation in institutional size, geographic location, and student demographics: The University of Toronto, University of Guelph, and Algoma University. Each institution was assessed and compared on 10 categories: organizational policies, history with Indigenous communities, types of services, collaborative efforts, community partnerships, cultural/linguistic barriers, location, operating hours, and website user experience

## RESEARCH FINDINGS: Mental Health Interventions



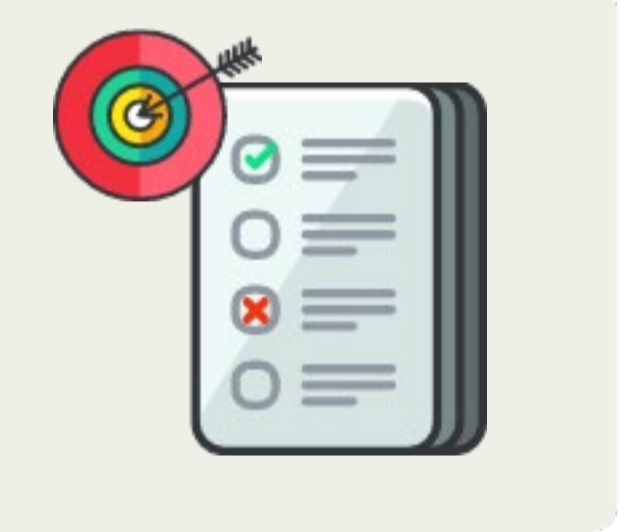
There is no national policy or guiding framework on mental health service delivery in Canada. However, policy recommendations at the national and provincial levels were aligned and stressed a comprehensive approach that uses an integrated whole-campus model of care

The University of Guelph is the leader in the integrated model but it does not mainstream equity in to the model



Indigenous researchers and knowledge makers have cited the shortfalls and potential harms of the medical model of interventions. They suggest adopting social and emotional wellbeing as a framework <sup>1</sup>

Algoma University uses a holistic Indigenous Wellness Strategy that is built on community support and knowledge sharing. It was created in collaboration with Indigenous communities and is Indigenous led



The comparative analysis findings revealed the most significant structural change in the University of Toronto. In 2019 the University established a taskforce on mental health that consulted with students and community members and presented recommendations to the administration.

The University partnered with CAMH to implement the recommendations and have adopted the Stepped model of care for mental health services

Source:  
1. Sutherland, S., & Adams, M. (2019). Building on the definition of social and emotional wellbeing: an Indigenous (Australian, Canadian, and New Zealand) viewpoint. *ab-Original: Journal of Indigenous Studies and First Nations and First Peoples' Cultures*, 3(1), 48-72.


## RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations are presented in a strategy designed for the report "Designing Equity in Student Mental Health: Strategies for Postsecondary Institutions"

The strategy is based on a 2021 CAMH strategy <sup>1</sup> that utilizes three equity recommendations: institutionalizing community collaborations and expertise, equipping staff and instructors with equity tools and knowledge, and collecting data on demographics to diagnose the inequities that affect mental health outcomes

**Interventions are organized at three levels:**

The strategy is intended to be a guide for postsecondary institutions on the best practices and recommended actions for designing and implementing equity practices in mental health delivery



**STUDENTS**

Care for marginalized students that is safe, accessible and equitable

**STAFF**


An equitable working environment for marginalized staff

**INSTITUTION**

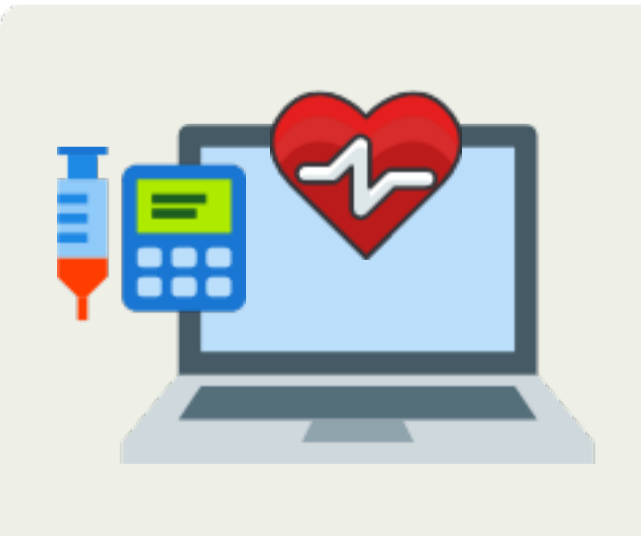
An institution wide wellness system which aims to eliminate unfair treatment for populations living with marginalization

Source:  
1. Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. Dismantling Anti-Black Racism: A Strategy of Fair and Just CAMH, 2021. <https://www.camh.ca/-/media/files/camh-anti-black-racism.pdf>


## RESEARCH FINDINGS: COVID19 Recovery Planning



The majority of postsecondary institutions in Ontario have partnered with private companies to offer students remote counselling in the pandemic. The mental health apps are available 24/7, can be accessed in any country for international students, and offer services in at least 30 languages. However, these generic services must not be a replacement for counselling services offered by the institution



COVID-19 accelerated the spread and scaling of e-health services. Universities in Ontario were quick in moving mental health services online but implementation challenges remain. There are equity gaps in who has access to the internet and/or a safe space to receive services



Recovery is built through partnerships. Cross departmental collaboration and community based participatory approaches are essential to equity in mental health. Structural changes require cross department collaboration internally, and partnering with community groups which provide innovative interventions externally



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