# Unsettling Colonial Order: Anti-Racism and Decolonization in Canadian Postsecondary Institutions

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Produced for Canadian Network for Equity and Racial Justice
May 202

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# Introduction

Universities and colleges across Canada reside on unceded Indigenous territories and have historically played a central role in nation-building efforts that excluded Indigenous, Black, and racialized communities. Canadian postsecondary institutions regularly speak proudly about their commitments to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), positioning themselves as EDI champions. Commitment is demonstrated in a recent flurry of so-called equity-focused initiatives and symbolic gestures, such as land acknowledgments, language around reconciliation and anti-racism, and hiring of Black and Indigenous faculty. The deeper infrastructures of whiteness, settler colonialism, and anti-Blackness remain intact, however. These rhetorical gestures often obscure entrenched systems of racial inequity and colonial domination, masking the structural racism and enduring colonial logics embedded within their foundations.

Contemporary struggles against racism in Canadian academic institutions are deeply rooted in the colonial legacy of this nation, which continues to shape its universities' policies, structures, and cultural norms. Although institutions often celebrate their commitments to racial equity, the enduring presence of systemic racism and anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism challenges these claims.

This paper argues that racism and coloniality are not simply institutional oversights but rather core features of Canadian postsecondary settings. It critically analyzes structural barriers, empirical data, case examples, and uses

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theoretical frameworks, as well as living and lived experiences to interrogate how the academy perpetuates racial inequities and continues to systemically marginalize Indigenous, Black, and racialized individuals and groups. By analyzing policy documents, research literature, and statistical evidence, this work demonstrates the limitations of performative inclusion and demands a radical reimagining of colleges and universities grounded in decolonial, anti-racist praxis. Drawing on scholars such as bell hooks, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Jason Arday, Delores V. Mullings, and George S. Dei, the paper explores how anti-racism and decolonial frameworks can challenge institutional complacency, transform curricula, redistribute power, and shift the centre to create space for historically excluded voices. The paper contends that meaningful transformation requires universities to move beyond symbolic gestures and orient themselves toward genuine institutional accountability.

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## Data and Disparities: What the Numbers Reveal

Three reports are used to analyze empirical data about educational access and attainment for Black, Indigenous, Asian, and Latin American students. The following summarizes the findings from Melvin Alexandria, Statistics Canada, Jaclyn Taylor, and Aneta Bonikowska et al., beginning with Indigenous students.

Aneta Bonikowska et al. (2024) report that postsecondary enrollment rates are highest among Chinese, Korean, and South Asian students and lowest

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among Latin American, Black, and white students. Some groups, such as West Asian students, display high postsecondary participation despite lower high school graduation rates, suggesting that Grade 10 academic performance has a stronger influence than household income. Indigenous students remain underrepresented in all forms of postsecondary attainment. Their 48.4% rate of credential completion is much less than the 64.7% national average, largely resulting from structural disadvantages rooted in residential schooling, colonial dispossession, and systemic racism.

Statistics Canada reinforces these findings, noting that while 60% of Black Canadians aged 25–64 have postsecondary qualifications, they are underrepresented in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields and graduate education, limiting their economic mobility. South Asian and Chinese Canadians—despite having 75.6% and 70.6% credential attainment, respectively—still face structural barriers in the workforce and academia. Latin American students also remain underrepresented in degree programs, especially beyond the undergraduate level.

Disaggregated data reveal further disparities within groups. For example, African-born Black Canadians, particularly immigrants from Nigeria or Ghana, attain bachelor's degrees at higher rates than long-established Black communities such as African Nova Scotians. However, their credentials do not necessarily translate into equitable employment or leadership opportunities, indicating structural exclusion regardless of academic success.

These disparities also reflect gender gaps. Filipino, Japanese, Southeast

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Asian, and West Asian women outpace their male counterparts by 16–17 percentage points in degree completion. Moreover, although Filipino students have relatively high postsecondary enrollment, many are streamed into diploma and college programs with limited access to graduate-level opportunities.

**Without disaggregated data, clear accountability frameworks, and systemic interventions, the gap between rhetoric and reality remains wide.**

Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly Ryerson University) completed a student self-identification report and found that Indigenous students account for only 1% of undergraduate and graduate students compared with 3% of the Greater Toronto Area and Ontario Indigenous population (4). Overall, racialized students accounted for 48% of undergraduate students and only 39% of graduate students (4). Black students are slightly underrepresented at 7% of undergraduate students compared with their population representation of 8%; however, a marked difference is seen with graduate students at only 3% (8). Black students also identified that the campus racial and ethnic diversity was not apparent in their programs.

Interestingly, the University of Windsor's First Year (1L) law student cohort demonstrates differences with Statistics Canada's reporting. In this case, while Caribbean and Black students were underrepresented in the nations' data, students of Caribbean or African origins were twice as likely to be represented in the program compared with Canada's census data; students of European or North American origins were underrepresented by a factor of 1.4 times; and 49% of 1L students were visible minorities [racialized], which the report notes is higher than Ontario's general population (University of Windsor).

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The persistence of these inequities calls into question the sincerity of institutional commitments to equity. Without disaggregated data, clear accountability frameworks, and systemic interventions, the gap between rhetoric and reality remains wide.

## Theoretical Frameworks: Anti-Racism and Decolonization

This analysis draws on critical theoretical frameworks to interrogate how postsecondary institutions in Canada reproduce colonial and racial hierarchies under the guise of inclusion. The work is grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT), decolonial theory, anti-racism, and Indigenous and Black feminist thought, each of which exposes the ideological and structural forces that perpetuate white supremacy in academic spaces. CRT foregrounds the role of race and racism as central to the construction of social institutions (Delgado and Stefancic).

Anti-racism and decolonization, while related, are distinct projects. As Dei asserts, “anti-racism is not just about naming race but also about naming power and its consequences” (23). Anti-racism is grounded in the recognition that systemic racism is embedded in the policies, practices, and discourses of institutions. Dei’s concept of “integrative anti-racism” is particularly relevant in Canada, where race intersects with colonialism, immigration, and linguistic diversity. Anti-racism requires confrontation with white supremacy, not as an individual belief but as an organizing principle of society (Henry and Tator 89). Delgado and Stefancic argue that racism is not aberrational but rather “the usual way society does business” (18).

**Decolonization means challenging the dominance of Western epistemology and advocating for the meaningful presence of different knowledge systems and traditions.**

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Within postsecondary contexts, doing business manifests through systemic marginalization of racialized scholarship, the exclusion of Black and Indigenous faculty from leadership, and the structural disadvantage embedded in what appear to be neutral policies.

Decolonization in this context means challenging the dominance of Western epistemology and advocating for the meaningful presence of different knowledge systems and traditions. It is about overcoming the idea that Western ways of knowing are the only legitimate or valuable forms of knowledge (Zhang 5). For some groups of Indigenous people, decolonization, by contrast, centres Indigenous sovereignty, knowledge systems, and relational accountability. Linda Tuhiwai Smith emphasizes that decolonization involves not only resisting colonial narratives and knowledge production but creating spaces for Indigenous peoples to reclaim their epistemologies and define their realities (Smith 24). Tuck and Yang caution against shifting decolonization into EDI initiatives, arguing that "decolonization is not a metaphor" but a political and material process grounded in land and Indigenous resurgence (Tuck and Yang 3). Thus, while anti-racism calls for an interrogation of racial hierarchies, decolonization demands a dismantling of the foundations upon which settler institutions are built.

Decolonial theory, as applied to education, extends this critique by emphasizing the ongoing presence of colonial structures within postcolonial societies. Walter Mignolo and Santino Bussmann describe coloniality as the logic of domination and control that persists beyond formal colonial rule,

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maintained through Western knowledge systems, institutional hierarchies, and global capitalism (Mignolo and Bussmann). More specifically:

> The model of the hu(man), however, is the mirror of the enunciators of the colonial matrix of power, who are native Westerners and also white, Christians, male and heterosexual but not westernized Latin Americans, African and Asian elites, who are not even predominantly white. (8)

**Anti-racist and decolonial theories provide tools to dismantle the institutional practices and ideologies that sustain white supremacy in Canadian academia.**

Indigenous feminists such as Simpson highlight how settler colonialism and patriarchy work together to erase Indigenous women's sovereignty and knowledge systems, and they rightfully demand a decolonial praxis that centres land, connectedness, and resurgence (Simpson 22).

The privileging of Eurocentric epistemologies, English-language dominance, and settler governance structures in higher education reflects coloniality. Linda Tuhiwai Smith insists that decolonization must involve both resisting colonial knowledge systems and reclaiming Indigenous ways of knowing (24). Further, Mignolo (15) argues that decoloniality calls for *epistemic disobedience*—a refusal to accept Western paradigms as universal and a demand for the validation of Indigenous and subaltern knowledge systems. Black feminist thought as articulated by bell hooks, Beverly-Jean Daniel, and Delores Mullings, highlight the intersecting nature of racism and discrimination. As Crenshaw notes, intersections explain how race, gender, and class operate

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together to structure discrimination and exclusion. Daniel, for example, notes that "blackness becomes hypervisible in the classroom and simultaneously invisible in institutional culture," by pointing to the emotional labour and surveillance that Black faculty endure (24). These frameworks collectively expose the contradiction between the university's presumed neutrality and its active role in reproducing hierarchies based on race and racism.

Together, anti-racist and decolonial theories provide tools to dismantle the institutional practices and ideologies that sustain white supremacy in Canadian academia. Proponents of these theories demand transformation of diverse representation, pedagogy, governance, and epistemological legitimacy. Moving forward, this paper uses these frameworks to analyze institutional culture, curriculum, and policy and advocate for concrete strategies toward racial justice and decolonization in the academy.

## Lived Realities: Navigating Racist and Colonial Systems and Structures

The lived and living experiences of Indigenous, Black, and racialized individuals and groups within post-secondary institutions show the never-ending operation of colonial and racist power. These systems are not remnants of a distant past; they continue to shape everyone's daily encounters in the academy. With unfair and exclusionary hiring practices created to benefit white

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people (See Smith, Appendix 1), microaggression [read macroaggressions] in classrooms, isolation, hostility, and scrutiny, the academy is structured by settler-colonial and anti-Black logics acting as gatekeepers that regulate access regarding who belongs and how knowledge is produced.

**Black, Indigenous, and racialized faculty and staff must frequently navigate hostile work environments while overperforming in diversity, service, and mentoring roles…**

Indigenous scholars report experiencing erasure through tokenization, marginalization in curriculum development, and limited influence in institutional governance. Both Indigenous and Black faculty often describe the burden of being the only one from within their racial and cultural groups in administration or academic unit. These individuals further discuss the expectation that they represent an entire race or community while receiving little institutional support. As Mullings et al. argue, Black women faculty regularly encounter “a system built to fracture solidarity,  defer power, and reward proximity to whiteness” (Sistah Circle 22). Racialized professors are often overburdened with service responsibilities related to equity while being excluded from meaningful decision-making processes (Arday and Mirza 543).

These realities are compounded by bureaucratic structures that reinforce and normalize white dominance. Hiring and promotion processes disproportionately reward research situated in Eurocentric paradigms, while dismissing community-engaged or anti-colonial work as lacking rigor or not legitimate. Black, Indigenous, and racialized faculty and staff must frequently navigate hostile work environments while overperforming in diversity, service, and mentoring roles that have little value in tenure and promotion assessments.

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Students, too, confront institutional violence in their educational journeys. Indigenous and Black students often report being dismissed when raising issues of racism in class, being surveilled in campus spaces, and being overlooked for research or leadership opportunities (Dortch and Patel 210). In her book, Black, Brown and Bruised: How Racialized STEM Education Still Stifles Innovation, McGee discusses Black, Indigenous and underrepresented racialized students' experiences navigating predominantly white institutions, often experiencing racial battle fatigue, microaggressions, and stereotypes that question their intelligence and belonging.

Memorial University's Strategic Planning Report (Mullings and Adelakun) and Dialogue Sessions Report: The Experiences of Racialized and International Students (Binte et al.) note that international, Black, and racialized students face the additional challenge of migration status, financial instability, and cultural alienation, which are aggravated by racial bias in disciplinary procedures and academic evaluations. The assumption of guilt in cases involving plagiarism or AI-related cheating often disproportionately applies to racialized students. Students whose first language is one other than English are particularly susceptible—a reflection of deep-seated institutional mistrust.

These experiences are not isolated incidents; they reveal how systemic discrimination is embedded in university's daily operations. Those who experience this racialized oppression often internalize the affective toll of exhaustion, rage, despair, and withdrawal, and this silence makes institutional harm both visible and disguised. Naming these realities is essential to disrupting

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systemic discrimination. As Walcott asserts, the university must reckon with its participation in the “long afterlife of slavery and colonization” if it hopes to become a site of liberation rather than reproduction (Walcott 45).

The next section examines how narratives, such as the model minority myth, contribute to intragroup tensions and the policing of racialized identities in academic spaces.

## Model Minority, Intragroup Tensions, and Discrimination

Walton and Truong discuss how the persistence of the model minority myth in academic settings has contributed to the erasure and marginalization of diverse, racialized communities while reinforcing intragroup tensions. “The model minority myth refers to the systematic construction of people of Asian descent as representing successful assimilation into a white dominant society and as ‘living examples of advancement [i.e. academic achievement] in spite of the persistent color line and because of their racial (often coded as cultural) differences’” (391, qtd. in Wu 2014, 6). Originally applied to East Asian communities, this myth positions certain racialized groups as inherently more disciplined, intelligent, and successful—an image that is both racialized and weaponized against Black, Indigenous, and Latinx populations.

The model minority myth potentially influenced Asian American students legal challenge to Harvard University's race-conscious, ethnicity and other factors in its admissions process. Their challenge centred on perceived bias and discrimination within the policy against some groups of students, including Asians. This case culminated in a 2023 U.S. Supreme Court decision that ended

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the consideration of race and ethnicity in college admissions had observable effects on student demographics. The Harvard Gazette reported the following:

> Of students who identified their race, 14 percent identified as African American or Black, a decrease from 18 percent in Class of 2027 data. Thirty-seven percent of students identified as Asian American, representing no change from the year prior. Sixteen percent of students identified as Hispanic or Latino, up from 14 percent the previous year. One percent of students identified as Native American, a decrease of 1 percent from the previous year. Fewer than 1 percent identified as Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, reflecting no change.

The model minority trope is used to deflect attention from systemic racism, suggesting that success is a matter of work ethic and cultural values, rather than structural access and privilege.

This framework creates a false hierarchy among East and South Asian groups and hides the complex realities of exclusion that many face. Lee discusses the dual racialization of Asian Americans as both “yellow peril” foreigners and model minorities, both of which reinforce white supremacy. As Bhopal explains, “the model minority narrative reinforces a meritocratic illusion that undermines solidarity among racialized communities and obscures the racial violence enacted upon others” (2301). The celebration of academic success within specific communities is often accompanied by pressure to conform to dominant norms, suppress political critique, and distance oneself from Blackness and Indigeneity.

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Moreover, the myth facilitates institutional neglect. The focus on achievement “make[s] it difficult for anti-Asian attitudes and discriminations to be recognized” (Lee 15). Administrators may point to high enrollment or academic performance among certain racialized students as evidence that anti-racist interventions are unnecessary. These same students face xenophobia, classroom microaggressions, and mental health stigma. Some groups of Asian students, such as Chinese and Filipinos, are frequently underrepresented in student leadership, academic governance, and graduate fields that shape institutional decision-making.

The model minority myth also exacerbates anti-Blackness within racialized communities. It implicitly and explicitly positions Black students and faculty as flawed by comparison, reinforcing anti-Black stereotypes and structural exclusion. This horizontal violence is particularly evident when Black scholars are overlooked for collaboration or ghettoized in interdisciplinary projects, even within equity-focused environments. Such dynamics create isolation, burnout, and a sense of tokenism.

Ingroup discrimination also occurs as a distinct and impactful form of prejudice that operates through complex psychological and social mechanisms. Vo et al. argue that this form of discrimination deserves greater theoretical and empirical attention, as it is often overlooked because of the prevailing focus on intergroup dynamics and the assumption of homogeneity and harmony within

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social groups (Vo et al. 2). Ingroup discrimination refers to negative, hostile, or marginalizing behaviours directed at individuals by others from the same social group (race, ethnicity, nationality, etc.) (2). The phenomenon is often less visible than intergroup discrimination and may manifest as subtle forms of tension, marginalization, rejection, bullying, exclusion, and hate (Vo et al. 2–3).

Colonization has also influenced how social groups relate to each other. Whyman et al. conducted a comprehensive scoping review to examine lateral violence—a form of internalized oppression where individuals from systemically marginalized groups direct their anger and frustration toward members of their own communities. This behaviour, which includes physical and nonphysical harm such as gossiping, bullying, and social isolation, is widespread and normalized in many Indigenous contexts globally. It is rooted in historical and ongoing colonialism, systemic discrimination, and the internalization of negative stereotypes. The authors support the idea that lateral violence originated from and is linked to the disruption of traditional cultural roles and community cohesion.

> **In fields like STEM… students may face exclusion not only from white bodies but also from peers within other systemically marginalized groups.**

A key finding focuses on how identity conflicts—especially the pressure to meet arbitrary standards of “authentic” Indigeneity—fuels intracommunity harm. For example, terms like “coconut” are used to shame individuals perceived as assimilating into whiteness. The use of “Oreo” has similar connotations in Black communities. This dynamic undermines personal and collective well-being.

The insights in Whyman et al. are especially relevant for understanding the experiences of Black, Latina/x, and Indigenous students in Canadian

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academic spaces, where lateral violence may compound the effects of systemic racism. In fields like STEM, where representation is low and mentorship sparse, students may face exclusion not only from white bodies but also from peers within other systemically marginalized groups. The authors call for dismantling narrow identity expectations and fostering inclusive, culturally safe academic environments.

Challenging the model minority myth and lateral violence requires more than broad and loose inclusion. It demands the dismantling of hierarchies among and between racialized groups, the centring of Black and Indigenous voices, and a refusal to allow success to be weaponized as evidence that racism no longer exists. A decolonial and anti-racist framework requires solidarity rooted in shared struggle, not comparative advancement.

## Students' Lived and Living Experiences

The following section turns to student experiences, detailing how institutional conditions impact their academic and personal lives and how they resist being marginalized through collective action.

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Black, Indigenous, and racialized students at the intersections of gender, sex, ability, migration, citizenship, language, birth country, health status, and class continue to face pervasive racism and colonial legacies in Canadian post-secondary institutions. Students are often grouped under the umbrella of "racialized students," but these communities encounter unique forms of exclusion shaped by histories of enslavement, slavery, trafficking, settler colonialism, and migration and must be carefully considered and integrated in anti-racist and decolonize policy and program.

**It demands…a refusal to allow success to be weaponized as evidence that racism no longer exists.**

Black and Indigenous students routinely navigate hostile and alienating environments in academic spaces. These environments are characterized by surveillance, exclusion, and structural neglect—conditions that erode their mental health, academic performance, and overall sense of belonging (Bailey iv; McGee; Toronto Metropolitan University 20). For example, campus security is routinely called during smudging activities. Institutional practices, rather than acting as protective mechanisms, often function to reinforce the very inequities universities claim to want to dismantle.

**Despite university rhetoric around wellness and inclusion… culturally affirming counselling services remain limited or nonexistent.**

Campus policing exemplifies this contradiction. Black students have reported being followed, detained, and in some cases handcuffed for simply existing in shared spaces such as libraries, residence halls, and student lounges. Shelby McPhee, a Black youth, was falsely accused of

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stealing a laptop and made to show his registration at Congress in a June 2019 racial profile case. These incidents underscore the racialized suspicion embedded in institutional security practices. They do not only criminalize Black presence but also send a clear message about who belongs and who does not on campus (Toronto Metropolitan University 21).

Mental health supports are equally compromised. Despite university rhetoric around wellness and inclusion, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, culturally affirming counselling services remain limited or nonexistent. Black and Indigenous students often find that existing supports fail to recognize or address the compounding effects of racial trauma, intergenerational grief, or systemic exclusion. The absence of diverse mental health practitioners, coupled with long wait times and Eurocentric approaches, renders many students unsupported in times of crisis (Henry et al. 110; Ahmed 137; Memorial University).

Racialized students also face academic scrutiny. With the rise of generative AI tools, there has been an alarming increase in accusations of plagiarism disproportionately levied against Black students. These allegations often lack nuance or procedural fairness and result in disciplinary actions that disproportionately affect international students who face visa insecurity, housing instability, food insecurity, and economic vulnerability. The assumption of guilt, along with the absence of meaningful advocacy, reflects institutional mistrust and neglect (Mullings, Personal Communication[1];Toronto Metropolitan University 18).

[1] Delores Mullings, [dmullings@mun.ca] with [Anon], July 23, 2023

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Access to enriching learning opportunities is also unequal. Black students are often the last to be selected for high-impact roles such as research assistantships, field placements, and co-curricular projects. When opportunities do arise, they tend to be poorly funded, inadequately mentored, or disconnected from career advancement pathways. The exclusion from elite academic networks and professional grooming perpetuates a long-term achievement gap (Cameron and Jefferies 13; Mullings, Community Service Learning and Anti-Blackness).

Despite these barriers, Black and Indigenous students persist. They form mutual aid networks, lead advocacy campaigns, curate cultural events, and build transformative communities of care. Through activism, artistic expression, and peer mentorship, they create alternate spaces of belonging and resistance seen at various institutions across the country. These efforts are not supplemental but central to the cause of reimagining the university (hooks 207).

## Staff and Faculty's Lived and Living Experiences

Black and Indigenous faculty and staff are routinely tasked with advancing institutional equity agendas, often without the resources, recognition, or authority needed to do so effectively. Many are placed in precarious or contract-based roles that lack decision-making power and long-term stability. These positions are often located outside of executive leadership structures, leaving racialized employees to implement change without institutional leverage.

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Racialized faculty report being overburdened with service responsibilities, including mentoring, equity work, and committee participation, while simultaneously being subjected to skepticism about their research legitimacy and teaching effectiveness. Cameron and Jefferies bring attention to what they call “the Black tax,” noting that Black scholars are expected to “publish 20 times better than their white peers to be perceived as equally competent for tenure advancement (13). Their research, especially when rooted in community engagement or critical race theory, is often devalued within tenure and promotion processes (Henry et al. 125).

**Black and Indigenous faculty and staff are routinely tasked with advancing institutional equity agendas, often without the resources, recognition, or authority needed to do so effectively.**

Daniel introduces the concept of “teaching while Black,” describing how Black faculty are subject to racial scrutiny and devaluation, especially from students and administrators who weaponize white femininity and liberal inclusion politics (24). The author is particularly articulate on the silence of white women and the hurt they invoke on Black female bodies. These experiences are echoed by Mohamed and Beagan, who assert that racialized faculty often feel like “strange faces in the academy,” burdened with invisible service labour and rendered illegitimate through Eurocentric norms. They note that “the language of the academy itself is a microaggression: meritocracy, colour blindness [colour invisibility], and insistence that the academy is an equitable institution committed to diversity and deny the reality experienced by faculty of colour” (340). Moreover, as Bhopal notes, the systemic lack of support and recognition leads

**Some universities have shifted to recognizing community-based scholarship in the tenure process but require ongoing work to universalize the understanding.**

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to high attrition rates among racialized academics, who often leave institutions that fail to address deeply embedded structures of racism (2296).

Staff in equity offices—many of whom are Black women—are frequently set up to fail. They are tasked with leading EDI and anti-racist change without sufficient staffing, budgets, or institutional backing. There is a dearth of academic literature exploring the experiences of academic staff. Bailey observes that staff roles are often "inconsistent or unsuccessful," not because of the staff themselves, but because of institutional ambivalence and resistance (iv). Equity positions are thus both highly visible and politically vulnerable—celebrated when institutions seek recognition but scapegoated when change efforts are criticized or stalled.

Access to decision-making leadership positions is restricted. While universities have made some strides in hiring equity officers or diversity consultants, these roles rarely serve as pipelines to provost-, vice-president-, or president-level appointments. Smith's findings on representation in senior leadership positions within Canada's U15 research intensive universities demonstrate significant disparities among Black, Indigenous and racialized persons. For example, Smith's findings published on Academic Women's Association of Alberta provides a breakdown of senior leadership representation:

> Board Chairs 85.7% white 57% male of which 7.1% are visible minority female, none are Indigenous. Chancellors are 100% white, of which 26.7% are female. Presidents are 80% white, and 86.7% male. Provosts and VPs (Academic) are 100% white, and 66.7% male. VPs

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(Research) nears gender parity with 46.7% female, 20% visible minorities (male and female combined). Deans of faculties and schools: 92.2% are white, 32% are female, and 7.7% are a visible minority or Indigenous person (male and female combined). See Appendix 1.

Racialized administrators are often confined to equity portfolios, signaling a broader pattern of exclusion from academic and financial leadership. Henry and Tator (2009) emphasize that systemic racism in the academy manifests through “gatekeeping mechanisms” that restrict racialized advancement (211). As underrepresented populations advance up the ranks, data show a decline in the leadership pipeline (Smith).

These dynamics generate exhaustion and disillusionment among faculty and staff who are deeply committed to justice but continuously sidelined. As Mohamed and Beagan point out, racialized academics often feel like “strange faces in the academy,” forced to navigate institutions that simultaneously demand their diversity and deny their authority (340). Many ultimately leave the academy, citing burnout, racism, and lack of support as contributing factors. Ma et al. examine the integration and impact of anti-racist and decolonial pedagogies in Canadian higher education. The study highlights the lack of, and therefore the necessity for, a "coherent and comprehensive approach implementing anti-racist or decolonial pedagogies in post-secondary education" (3) to these pedagogies, emphasizing that fragmented efforts can hinder meaningful progress. The authors advocate for collaborative endeavors, asserting that "decolonizing the university is the work of all instructors" thereby

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promoting shared responsibility in educational reform (15).

To address these conditions, institutions must commit to transformative restructuring. This includes creating accountable leadership pipelines for historically marginalized Indigenous and racialized faculty and staff. Some universities have shifted to recognizing community-based scholarship in the tenure process but require ongoing work to universalize the understanding. In addition, anti-racist scholarship in evaluation processes and embedded equity roles within senior decision-making bodies are needed. Without these changes, universities will continue to cycle through well-intentioned personnel while leaving the underlying systems of exclusion untouched.

## Performative Approaches to Institutional Transformation

In the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action and the global racial reckoning following the 2020 public execution of George Floyd, Canadian colleges and universities rapidly introduced racial equity hiring initiatives and strategic plans to increase the representation of Indigenous and Black faculty and students. Notably, many institutions became signatory to the Scarborough Charter on Anti-Black Racism and Black Inclusion in Canadian Higher Education, which outlines guiding principles for Black flourishing and accountability. However, "while Black lives are publicly affirmed in institutional statements, Black faculty remain subject to epistemic exclusion, excessive scrutiny, and racialized resistance" (Bell et al. 150).

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Canadian universities have also adopted EDI frameworks that promise transformation but often result in superficial change. These institutional responses are frequently characterized by symbolism over substance—land acknowledgments, anti-racism statements, or the hiring of equity officers without structural support. While such gestures may signal progress, they often function as performative acts that obscure the deeper colonial and racial hierarchies embedded in university governance, pedagogy, and culture (Bell et al. Henry, Mullings, Community Service Learning and Anti-Blackness 2022).

**Institutional responses are characterized by symbolism over substance—land acknowledgments, anti-racism statements, or the hiring of equity officers without structural support.**

Ahmed introduces the concept of "non-performativity" to describe how institutional language can simultaneously name and nullify the work of anti-racism. Diversity policies, she argues, often operate to “block the transformation they describe” (141). In Canadian higher education, this manifests in the proliferation of EDI committees, reports, and frameworks that rarely result in material change for Black and Indigenous faculty, staff, or students. The failure to follow symbolic commitments with action breeds cynicism and deepens institutional mistrust.

Moreover, institutional EDI efforts are often decontextualized from histories of colonization and slavery. Anti-racism is framed as an abstract principle rather than a response to material conditions and legacies of violence. As Tuck and Yang (2012) caution, “decolonization is not a metaphor;” yet in postsecondary contexts, it is routinely reduced to curriculum audits or faculty

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workshops that leave core power structures untouched (1). Reconciliation is similarly diluted, functioning as a public relations strategy rather than a call to dismantle settler governance and epistemic dominance.

Even when institutions commit to change, implementation is often delegated to under-resourced units or individuals without institutional power. Racialized leaders are tasked with transforming institutions that remain structurally hostile to their presence. These roles become sites of racialized labour and political risk. For example, equity leads are not involved in equity-related matters, including crisis. Without clear metrics, accountability mechanisms, or sustainable funding, such efforts collapse under the weight of institutional inertia.

The language of inclusion further obscures the persistence of exclusion. Universities tout their racially diverse demographics while maintaining Eurocentric curricula, white-dominated leadership, and metrics of success rooted in colonial definitions of excellence. The aesthetic of diversity replaces the ethics of justice. As Walcott notes, true transformation requires "abandoning the university as we know it in order to imagine and build a different one" (97).

**Courses on race, Indigeneity, and colonialism are often siloed, underfunded, and treated as electives rather than central components of academic programs.**

A shift toward authentic transformation requires naming institutional complicity, redistributing decision-making power, and embedding anti-racist and decolonial frameworks at every level of governance. Anything less is not transformation but rather disingenuous and reproduction.

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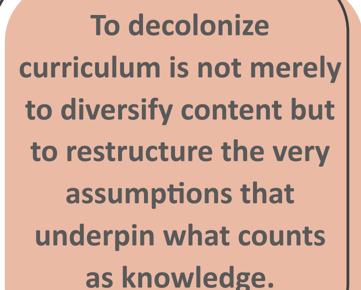
## Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Omission

The curriculum remains one of the most enduring sites of epistemic violence in Canadian postsecondary education. Despite claims of diversity and inclusion, most curricula continue to privilege Western knowledge systems while marginalizing or erasing Indigenous, Black, and non-Western epistemologies. This epistemic exclusion is not accidental; it is a legacy of colonial education systems designed to promote Eurocentric values and to subordinate other ways of knowing (Smith 29; Dei 45). Parallel to this argument, Smith and Rohde's assessed the University of Windsor's Master of Social Work program in which students' complaints outlined anti-Black racism in course content including videos and guest speakers. These complaints also identified senior administrators' inappropriate and lack of response to students (8).

Courses on race, Indigeneity, and colonialism are often siloed, underfunded, and treated as electives rather than central components of academic programs. As Gaudry and Lorenz argue, most institutions stop at symbolic inclusion rather than engaging in what they call "reconciliation indigenization," which would require rethinking curricula around Indigenous governance and knowledge systems (221). Similarly, Lopez and Gaetane contend that anti-Blackness is reproduced in the academy through the omission of Black histories, intellectual traditions, and community-grounded methodologies (56).




Black faculty frequently face scrutiny for incorporating anti-racist or decolonial frameworks into their syllabi. As Daniel notes, the emotional labour of

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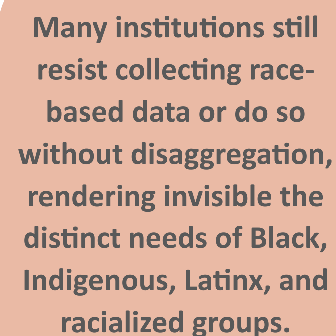
teaching while Black includes navigating student resistance, institutional surveillance, and isolation from pedagogical decision-making spaces (25). Meanwhile, white faculty teaching from Eurocentric perspectives often escape such scrutiny, reinforcing the double standard in academic legitimacy and curricular freedom (Ahmed 128).

Tokenistic inclusion, such as inserting a single Indigenous reading into a syllabus or featuring a guest speaker (working for free) during Black History Month or Orange Shirt Day, fails to address the structural dominance of whiteness in curricula. These performative gestures reinforce the notion that Indigenous and Black knowledges are supplementary rather than foundational, and racialized knowledge is often not existent beyond a few exceptions such as Ghandi. As hooks (1994) reminds us, education as a practice of freedom demands the full integration of multiple epistemologies and an ethical commitment to transformation (43).

To decolonize curriculum is not merely to diversify content but to restructure the very assumptions that underpin what counts as knowledge. This requires hiring and retaining Black, Indigenous and racialized faculty across all disciplines, funding community-engaged scholarship, and centring oral, relational, and land-based pedagogies (Car, Dei, Gaudry, Henry et al., Lorenz, and Smith). Without such structural change, educational institutions will continue to reproduce colonial and racial hierarchies under the guise of inclusion.




The following section critiques institutional gaps in infrastructure and

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administrative commitment, including the lack of resources, planning, and political will to support meaningful equity work.

## Institutional Gaps: Infrastructure and Administrative Commitment

Despite public commitments to EDI, many Canadian postsecondary institutions continue to underfund and under-resource the very offices, programs, and people responsible for transformative change. This is a clear signal of the lack of commitment from senior administrators. Equity initiatives are often launched with fanfare but receive minimal operational support, inadequate budgets, or short-term staffing. These gaps are not logistical oversights—they are reflections of institutional main concerns that deprioritize racial justice in favour of managing reputation including showing up for photo opportunities.

Institutions frequently create equity positions without clear mandates, proper authority, or integration into executive governance. Most of these roles are held by Black and racialized individuals, who are then expected to fix systemic issues without decision-making power or access to it, sustainable infrastructure, and adequate resources. As Cukier et al. highlight, equity leaders often work in isolation, disconnected from strategic planning processes and unsupported by senior administrators committed to maintaining status quo power relations (572).

The failure to create inclusive and accountable governance systems is compounded by a lack of data infrastructure. Many institutions still resist

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collecting race-based data or do so without disaggregation, rendering invisible the distinct needs of Black, Indigenous, and racialized groups. Without evidence-informed planning, universities cannot measure progress, identify barriers, or allocate resources equitably. Ghebremusse underscores that this lack of transparency “undermines the credibility of institutional equity efforts and sustains the myth of neutrality in academic policy” (8).

Administrative gaps are particularly stark when institutions respond to racialized crises. When students or faculty experience racist incidents, formal institutional supports are often lacking, so responses are reactive, individualized, nonresponsive, and handled through human resources frameworks that treat racism as interpersonal conflict rather than systemic harm. These processes offer no meaningful redress. They fail to repair harm and frequently retraumatize complainants, often suggesting that the complainants are oversensitive. Institutions also fail to protect those leading equity work from backlash, isolation, and professional risk. Such environments produce what Bailey terms 'institutional gaslighting,' where the lived experiences of racism are routinely denied or reframed as misunderstandings by administrators (Bailey 145).

Infrastructure gaps extend into physical and cultural spaces as well. Universities invest heavily in new buildings and branding but rarely prioritize spaces for Black and racialized students to gather, organize, or celebrate cultural identity.

Faculty lounges, boardrooms, and research centres remain predominantly white, while support programs for racialized students and

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scholars are often relegated to small, under-resourced offices.

Bridging these gaps requires intentional, long-term investment. Equity work must be treated as central to academic excellence and resourced accordingly. Institutions must embed racial justice into budgeting, planning, and evaluation—not as an add-on but as a criterion of institutional legitimacy. Only then can postsecondary institutions move beyond symbolic gestures and begin to embody the principles they profess to uphold.

Next, we examine longstanding movements within and beyond the academy that pushed for anti-racist and decolonial transformation long before institutions began publicly committing to these goals.

## Longstanding Anti-Racist and Decolonial Activism

The push for racial justice and decolonial transformation in Canadian universities did not begin with institutional EDI statements or task forces. Long before these became formalized responses to public pressure, students, staff, faculty, and community organizers were actively resisting white supremacy, settler colonialism, and exclusionary academic practices. A historical case of activism occurred in February 1969, when 13 students participated in a 13-day civil disobedience at George Williams University (now Concordia University) in response to the university's lack of action on complaint of racism against a professor. On October 28, 2022, Concordia University formally apologized for the treatment of those students

**Bridging these gaps requires intentional, long-term investment. Equity work must be treated as central to academic excellence and resourced accordingly.**

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(some deceased) and the mishandling of the racist incident. These longstanding movements laid the groundwork for much of the language, frameworks, and demands that institutions now claim to endorse.

> **Organizers and scholars who speak out against institutional racism often face retaliation, professional marginalization, or burnout.**

Black and Indigenous student groups have historically played critical roles in advocating for inclusive curriculum, equitable hiring, and the establishment of cultural centres. Organizations such as the Black Students' Network, Canadian Student Federation, and Indigenous student unions have documented institutional racism, disrupted convocation ceremonies, and staged sit-ins to demand meaningful change, tuition reduction, and housing. Other global student activism includes "Rhodes Must Fall", "Why is my Curriculum White?" and "#Feesmustfall". Students on many university campuses across Canada last year held sit-ins and demonstrated for peace. Several institutions sought court orders and injunctions against the students to remove them from university properties. These movements emphasized community accountability, intergenerational justice, and structural reform.

Similarly, faculty coalitions such as the Dalhousie Black Faculty and Staff Caucus and the University of Toronto Black Faculty Network have called out discriminatory hiring practices, lack of tenure opportunities, and systemic exclusion from governance. These networks have published reports, held public forums, and supported early-career scholars through mentorship and advocacy. As Mullings et al. note, this kind of "grassroots knowledge production and resistance is often co-opted without attribution when institutions later adopt anti-racist or decolonial language" (Service Learning as a Conduit 25).

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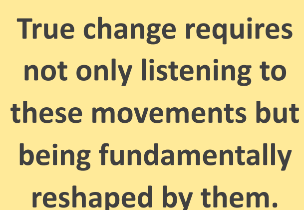
Community organizations have also been at the forefront of pushing universities toward justice. Groups like the Black Legal Action Centre and the Ontario Alliance of Black School Educators have worked alongside academic units to advocate for educational access, support services, and anti-racist pedagogy. These partnerships challenge universities to move beyond symbolic engagement and toward reciprocal, community-driven models of accountability. However, many of these movements operate at great personal and political cost. Organizers and scholars who speak out against institutional racism often face retaliation, professional marginalization, or burnout. Yet their work continues to shape national conversations on race and education, holding universities to account for their complicity in upholding systemic violence. These efforts exemplify what Cukier et al. describe as "leadership from the margins"—transformative resistance driven by those most affected by exclusion (568).




Rather than erasing or appropriating these histories, institutions must honour them by resourcing community-based scholarships, amplifying activist knowledge, and redistributing institutional power. Meaningful and sustainable change within institutions requires listening to activist movements and being fundamentally reshaped by them.

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# Case Studies: Anti-Racist and Decolonial Initiatives in Academia

Several universities across Canada have embarked on anti-racist and decolonial initiatives that reveal both the transformative possibilities and persistent limitations of institutional change. These case studies demonstrate the importance of leadership, funding, and community collaboration, as well as the dangers of performativity and policy without power.

**Institutions must ensure equity work is embedded in budget priorities, academic leadership, and outcome metrics, or risk replicating the same exclusions they purport to challenge.**

At Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly Ryerson), the Anti-Black Racism Campus Climate Review Report identified systemic racism in hiring, student discipline, faculty evaluation, and curriculum design. The report's recommendations included mandatory anti-racism training, the collection of disaggregated race-based data, and increased Black faculty recruitment. While some changes were implemented, students and faculty reported ongoing issues, especially regarding disciplinary bias and campus policing (Toronto Metropolitan University 20–21).

Dalhousie University established the James R. Johnston Chair in Black Canadian Studies—the first of its kind in the country—and has supported African Nova Scotian research and engagement. Despite this institutional recognition, the chair has operated without sufficient staffing and infrastructure. The initiative demonstrates the necessity of sustained investment beyond symbolic

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appointments. Echoing these concerns, Cameron and Jefferies assert that "Black leadership roles often exist in name only, lacking operational support and structural influence" (14).

The University of British Columbia's Indigenous Strategic Plan represents one of the most comprehensive efforts to embed Indigenous perspectives across university functions. Developed in collaboration with Indigenous faculty, students, and community members, it outlines goals tied to governance, curriculum, student support, and research (University of British Columbia). Yet Indigenous scholars have noted that implementation remains uneven, particularly at the departmental level where institutional inertia and white resistance persist (Gaudry and Lorenz 224).

Also in British Columbia, Langara College's Indigenization strategy integrates Elders-in-Residence, Indigenous teaching methods, and student wellness supports into classroom and administrative life. In addition, it disseminates statements about "[deepening] our relationship with Musqueam and other Indigenous Nations and communities" and Indigenization progress and baseline, implementing a formal Aboriginal education policy. These efforts, rooted in longstanding partnerships with local First Nations, are cited by Chan et al. as a model of "co-governance and cultural resurgence in a community college setting" (92). Yet as with larger institutions, success hinges on sustained funding and institutional accountability.

In contrast, some smaller institutions and community colleges have made progress by building equity work into strategic planning and senior

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administration. George Brown College's Anti-Racism Strategy includes race-conscious hiring, supports for racialized students, and faculty development tied to inclusive pedagogy. These changes were implemented through a collaborative process between staff, students, and local organizations, highlighting the importance of community accountability. Similarly, initiatives at McGill and the University of Ottawa have shown progress in curriculum reform and faculty hiring when supported by clear goals and dedicated leadership (Cukier et al. 570).

To effect meaningful transformation, institutions must abandon the comfort and safety of incremental change. It cannot be business as usual.

These case studies underscore the need for long-term, institution-wide commitment. Success requires integrating anti-racism and decolonization into all levels of planning and evaluation, not just relying on a few individuals or symbolic programs. Institutions must ensure equity work is embedded in budget priorities, academic leadership, and outcome metrics, or risk replicating the same exclusions they purport to challenge.

The data in the next section underscores the urgency for dismantling the postsecondary environment in Canada.

## Post-Secondary Completion and Participation Rates

Empirical data on postsecondary access and outcomes in Canada underscore the structural inequities within the system. All charts, tables and narratives around data are sourced from Bonikowska et al., Melvin Alexandria, Statistics Canada, and Jaclyn Taylor.

Despite increasing numbers of Black, Indigenous, and historically

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underrepresented racialized students entering post-secondary institutions, systemic barriers continue to impact educational attainment, field of study, retention, and transition into leadership roles. According to a Statistics Canada 2023 publication, an analysis of the 2021 Census of Population found that Black and Indigenous students remain significantly underrepresented in graduate programs and faculty positions compared with their white and certain Asian counterparts.

Significant racialized disparities also exist in educational access, attainment, and outcomes. Despite policy commitments to equity, the lived and living experiences and data outcomes of Black, Indigenous, and some racialized populations in postsecondary contexts demonstrate persistent structural inequity.

A 2021 report by Statistics Canada on “Canadian-born Black Populations: Educational Attainment and Earnings” reveals that Black Canadians are more likely to have completed college-level education but are underrepresented in university-level programs, particularly graduate education. The report also notes that Black graduates earn less than white graduates even when holding similar qualifications (Wall and Wood). This suggests systemic bias in both educational advancement and labour market integration.

Bonikowska et al. note that the pattern of enrolment in degree programs generally mirrors overall postsecondary enrolment across population groups, except for Filipino youth, who had high postsecondary enrolment rates but lower degree program enrolment. The largest gender gaps in degree enrolment

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(favouring girls) were observed among Japanese, Southeast Asian, and West Asian youth (16 to 17 percentage points). A review of the data is stark and provides a more nuanced picture of the situation. Table 1 provides additional, notable enrolment trends.

Table 1

Educational Disparities by Population Group

| **Population Group** | **Key Trend** | **Implications** |
|---|---|---|
| Korean Canadians | Over 60% hold a bachelor’s degree or higher | Model minority myth masks broader racial inequities |
| South Asian Canadians | Overrepresented in computing professions | Immigration policy shapes occupational clustering |
| Latin American (Post-2001 Immigrants) | Twice as likely to hold a bachelor's compared with earlier immigrants | Changing educational profile of immigrants, but degrees may be underused |

Although African-origin (those born outside of Canada) Black populations demonstrate the highest rates of bachelor's degree attainment among Black communities, these credentials do not guarantee equitable access to academic

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employment or leadership positions, highlighting the gap between educational achievement and institutional inclusion (Figure 1).

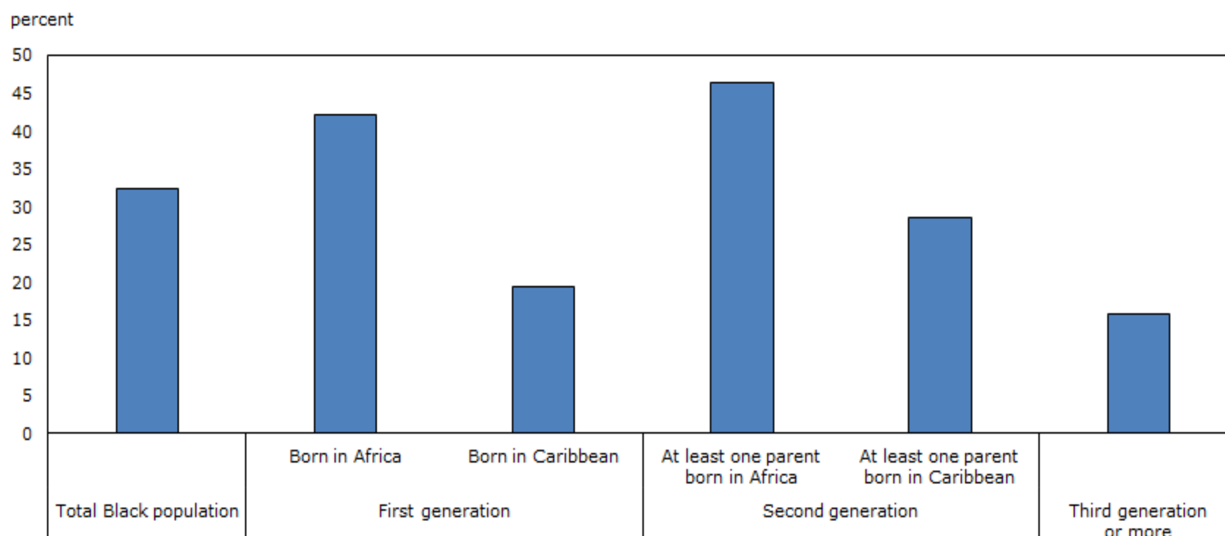


Fig. 1. African-origin Black populations were most likely to have a bachelor's degree or higher.

It must be noted that the lived and living experiences of African, Caribbean, and Black Canadians differ significantly from African-born Blacks who have a more recent migration history to Canada when compared with other Black populations. This includes historical African Nova Scotians and others who predate 20th century migration. Despite strong academic credentials, African-origin Black individuals face significant challenges in converting education into equitable outcomes such as employment, leadership roles, and fair wages. This reflects the disconnect between access and structural inclusion. Broadly, Black students remain underrepresented in graduate programs and among faculty ranks, despite comparable or increasing postsecondary participation. Table 2 breaks down the percentage of graduates by level of education per minority population group.

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Table 2.

Graduation Rates for Students in Canada: Statistical Breakdown

| Group | Bachelor's or Higher (%) | College Credentials (%) | Master's or PhD (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Total Population | 32.9 | 34.0 | 9.3 |
| Indigenous | 16.0 | 23.0 | <1 (est.) |
| Black (Non-Immigrant) | 18 (M), 31 (F) | Not Specified | ~5 (est.) |
| Black (Immigrant) | ~25 (F), higher (M) | Not Specified | 11.3 |
| Arab | 40.8 | Not Specified | Not Specified |
| South Asia | 51.8 | Not Specified | ~11 (est.) |
| East Asian (Chinese) | 54.9 | Not Specified | ~11 (est.) |
| Latin American | 32.9 | Not Specified | Not Specified |

Systemic structural barriers to education also frame the experience among Indigenous students. Such students are disproportionately tracked into college-level programs rather than universities, restricting their access to graduate studies and faculty opportunities (Figure 2 and Figure 3). This stratification mirrors long-standing colonial legacies embedded within the education system where Black and Indigenous students were and still are streamed into lower-level, non-university programs and courses.

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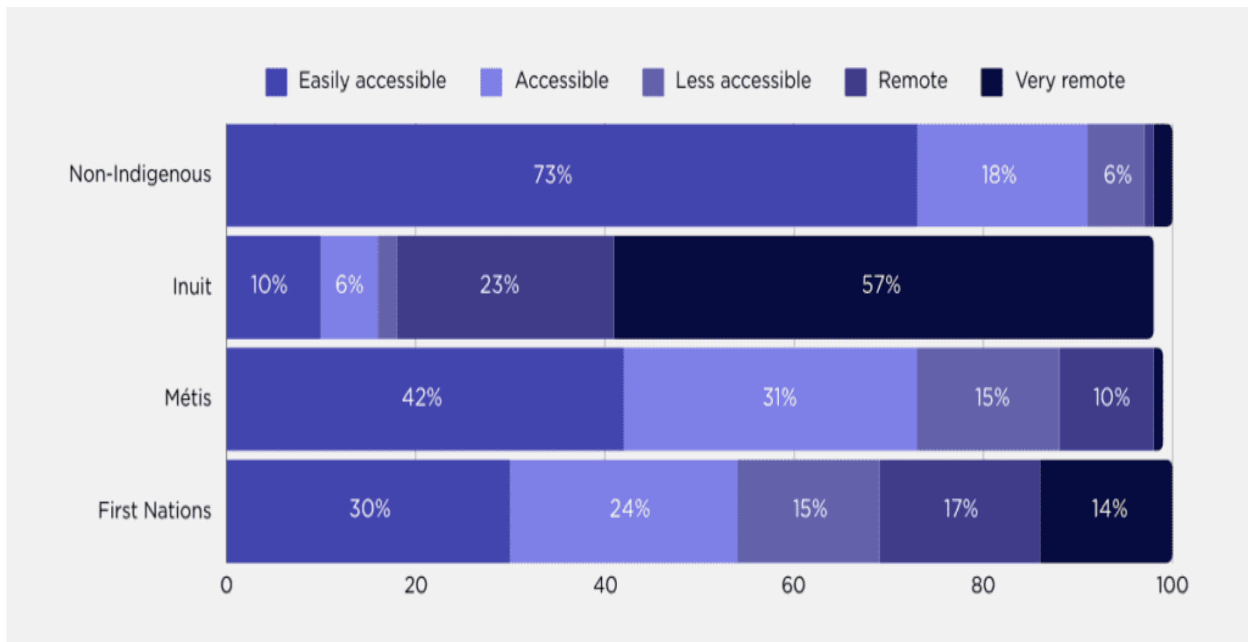


Fig. 2. Post-secondary Accessibility for Indigenous Peoples in Canada

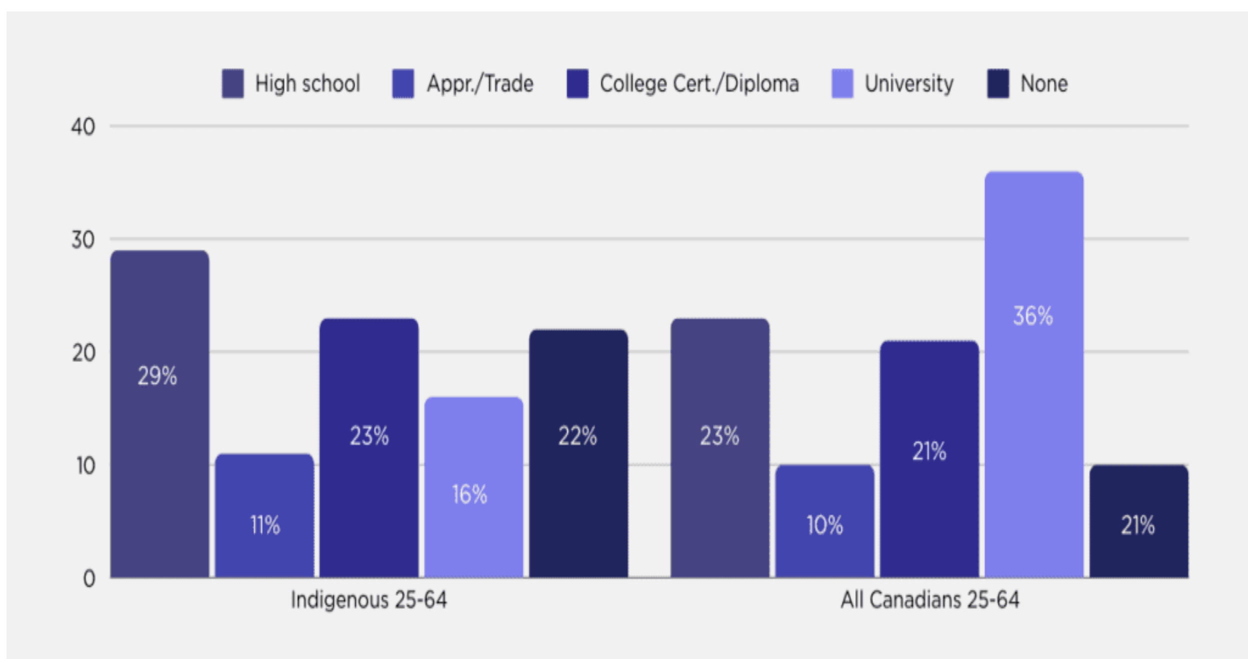


Fig. 3. New Entrants to Post-Secondary: Indigenous Learners More Likely to Enter at the College Level

These patterns underscore the need to critically assess not only who gains access to postsecondary education but also how systems reproduce racial

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stratification through differentiated outcomes. Targeted, anti-racist policy interventions are required to disrupt these patterns and ensure that equity commitments translate into material transformation.

Indigenous students have lower completion rates than other student groups, reflecting historical and ongoing structural barriers to university access (e.g., living on Reserves and in rural areas), affordability, and cultural safety in academic spaces. Refer Figure 4.

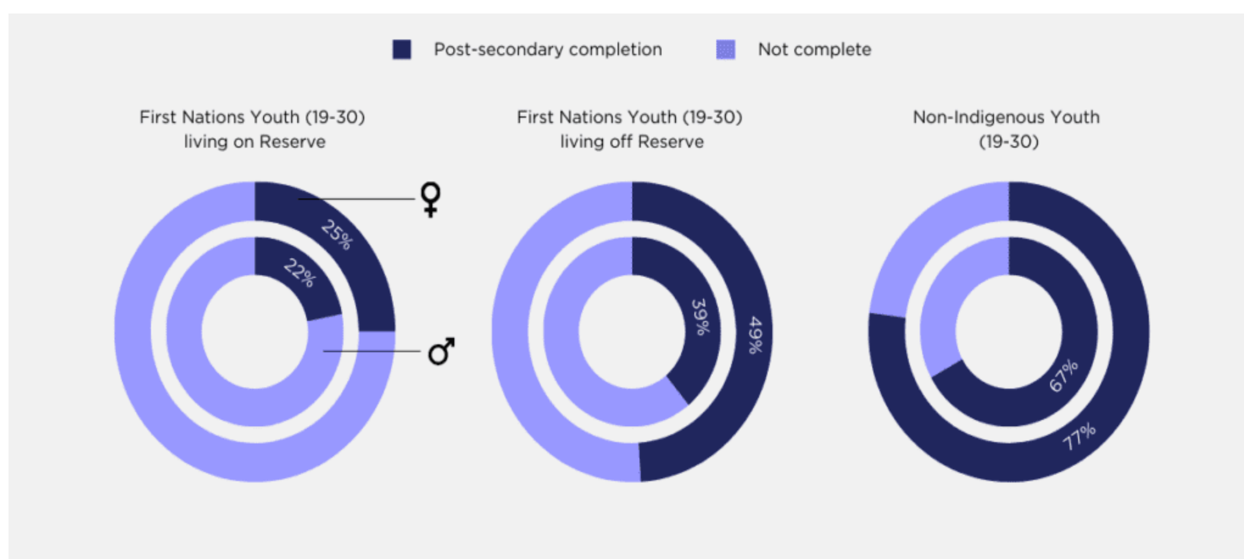


Fig. 4. Postsecondary Completion/Participation Rate

Other population groups display contrasting patterns shaped by immigration and labour market policies. Latin American immigrants arriving in Canada after 2001 are twice as likely to hold a bachelor's degree compared with earlier cohorts, reflecting both a shift in immigration profiles and potential barriers in professional integration, including credential recognition (Figure 5).

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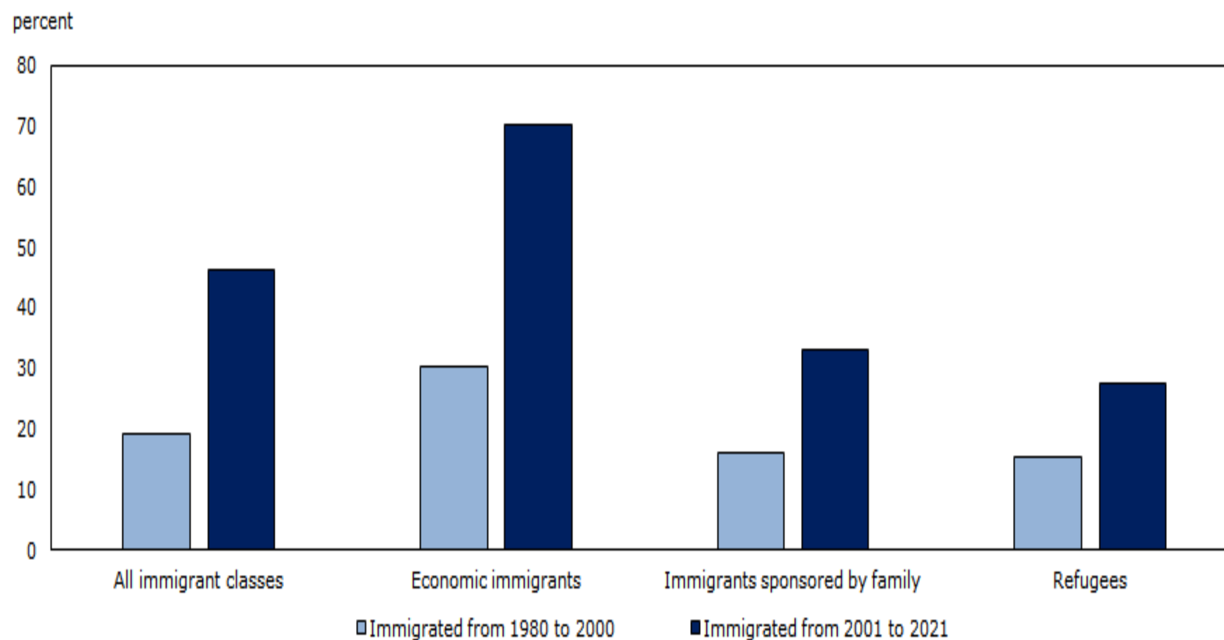


Fig. 5. Latin American immigrants who immigrated from 2001 to 2021 were more than twice as likely to have a bachelor's degree or higher compared with those who immigrated earlier.

South Asian Canadians, comparatively, are overrepresented in computing professions (Figure 6)—a trend largely influenced by skilled immigration policy rather than systemic educational equity.

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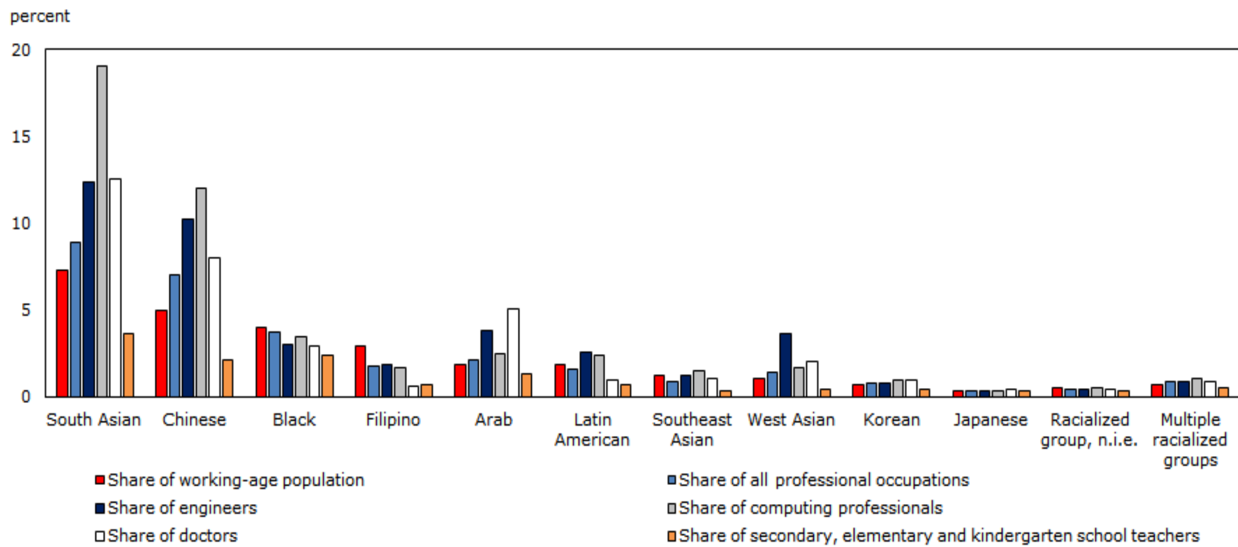


Fig. 6. Representation of South Asian people in computing professions is over twice that of their representation in the working-age population.

Korean Canadians exhibit high levels of academic achievement, with over 60% attaining a bachelor's degree or higher (Figure 7). This outcome reinforces a model minority narrative that can obscure structural inequities facing Korean Canadians and other historically disadvantaged groups.

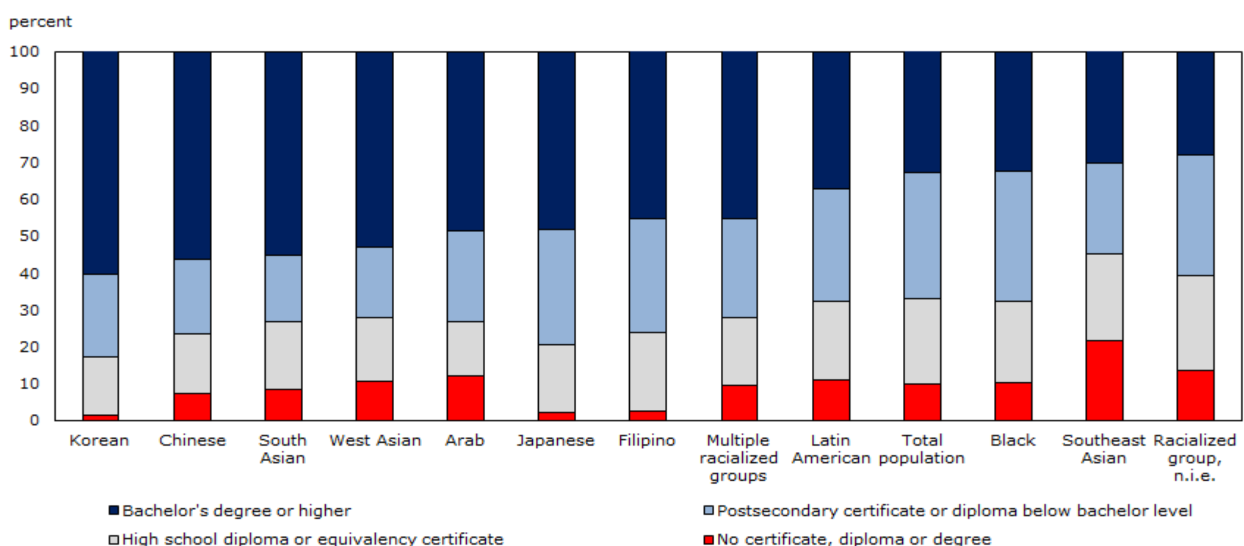


Fig. 7. 6 in 10 among the Korean population have a bachelor’s degree or higher.

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According to Statistics Canada, "across population groups, graduation rates continue to vary significantly, with Indigenous and Black students generally experiencing lower rates of completion in degree programs." These trends persist despite rising enrolment. Table 3 explores factors that may influence graduation rates among certain groups.

Table 3

Graduation-Level Trends

| **Group** | **Bachelor's Degree** | **Master's PhD** | **Key Factors** |
|---|---|---|---|
| African origin Black | 46% | Higher | Parental education, economic-class immigration. |
| Caribbean origin Black | 27% | Lower | Historical lower parental education. |
| East Asian | ~60% | 23% (STEM) | Overrepresentation in STEM fields. |
| Latin American | <20% | Minimal | Early skill gaps, socioeconomic barriers. |

Note the overrepresentation in STEM among East Asians in Table 3, as mentioned earlier. In the case of STEM, Asians, along with European professors, are the overwhelming majority. Black, Indigenous, and Latinx students have reported facing challenges with both Asian and European professors and supervisors (Dortch and Patel). However, Estrada et al. and Kelly argue for increased faculty interactions (e.g., video messaging,

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responsiveness, virtual office hours, and model professional behaviour) in STEM to create a positive educational climate for underrepresented racialized students.

Park et al. used data from 778 students in the National Longitudinal Study of Freshmen to explore inequity in STEM through a CRT lens. They investigated how racial discrimination affects student-faculty interactions in STEM and revealed that these interactions do not yield equal benefits across racial groups. While faculty engagement is typically associated with positive academic outcomes, Black STEM students who frequently interact with faculty are more likely to encounter racial discrimination, which undermines the potential academic value of those interactions. The authors state, “Although faculty interaction is often conceptualized as beneficial, Black students in STEM are more likely to experience racial discrimination when engaging with faculty” (223).

In contrast, white students benefit from faculty interaction without facing similar racial barriers, illustrating systemic inequities in STEM higher education. Adding further complexity, Latinx and Asian American students report that satisfaction with their academic environment positively influences their GPA. However, for Black students, “high academic motivation and faculty engagement did not translate into GPA benefits due to the persistence of racial discrimination” (225). This study highlights how ostensibly neutral academic practices reproduce racial disparities in student outcomes even when attempts are being made to ameliorate the conditions.

As Henry and Tator argue, “the very structure of Canadian universities continues to reflect the values, priorities, and histories of white Euro-Canadians”

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(92), perpetuating systemic inequalities through curriculum, leadership, and policy. For many students, the academy is not a neutral space, but one that erases their cultural epistemologies and devalues their lived experiences.

Finally, as noted previously, the largest gender gaps in degree program enrolment (in favour of girls) are observed among Japanese, Southeast Asian, and West Asian youth by up to 17 percentage points. Although this shows a feminization of success in some racialized communities, the data do not reflect structural power or leadership access in postsecondary leadership.

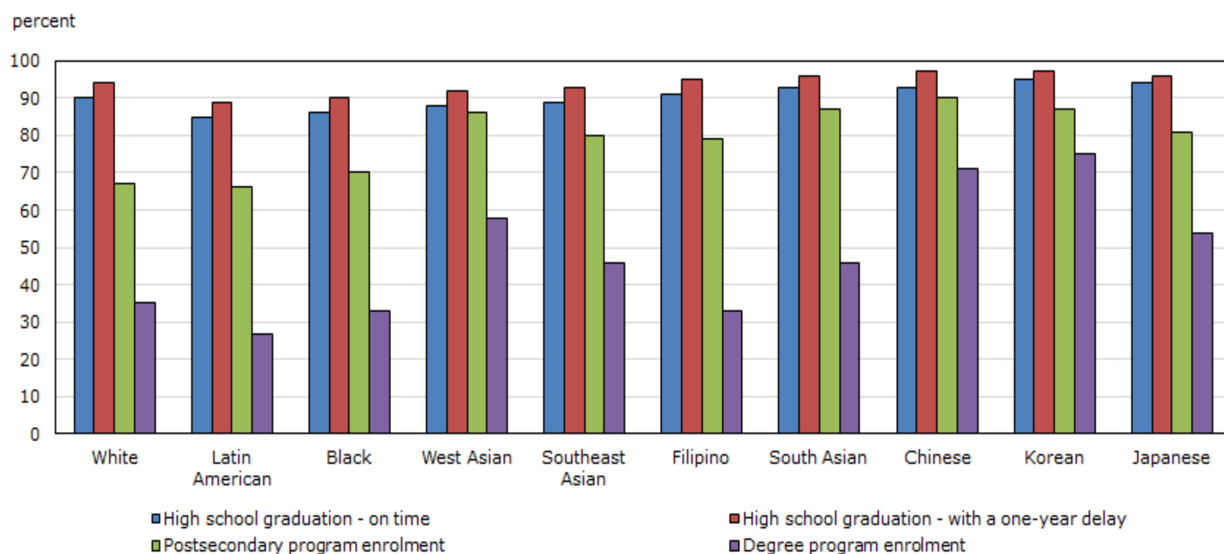


Fig. 8. Educational outcomes by population group (girls).

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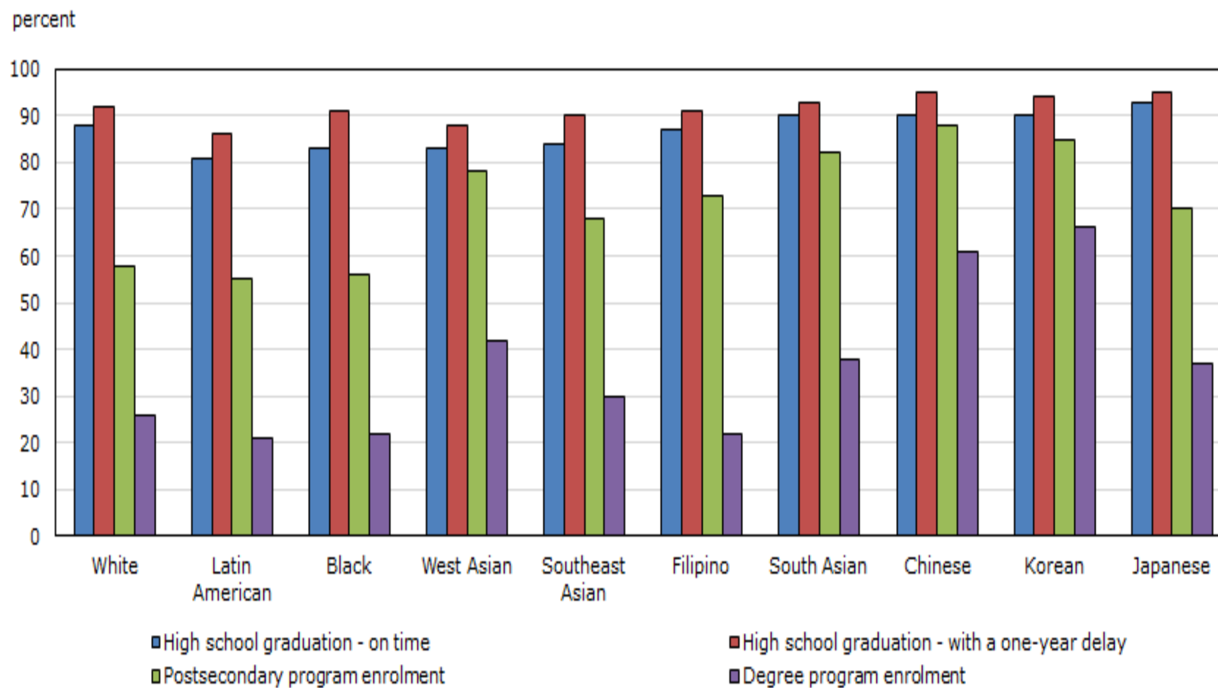


Fig. 9. Educational outcomes by population group (boys).

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The final section offers concluding reflections and outlines pathways toward a truly transformed and accountable postsecondary system.

## Conclusion: Pathways Forward

Canadian postsecondary institutions are at a crossroads. They can either continue to recycle performative equity measures and symbolic gestures or commit to the deep structural transformation demanded by decades of student, faculty, and community activism. The evidence throughout this paper, drawn from institutional reports, scholarly research, and lived and living experience, reveals that systemic racism and colonial power are not peripheral issues but foundational to how universities operate.

To effect meaningful transformation, institutions must abandon the comfort and safety of incremental change. It cannot be business as usual. Space must be created for racial justice to be treated not as a branding exercise, photo opportunity, or badge of honour but rather as a core principle that guides budgeting, governance, hiring, curriculum, and student support. This includes collecting disaggregated data, structural support for equity offices, protection for Black, Indigenous, and racialized students, staff and faculty from retaliation, and inclusive leadership pipelines that extend beyond EDI portfolios.

Decolonization and anti-racism must be integrated into every facet of institutional life—from research agendas and academic policy to campus policing and pedagogy. Car articulates the need for a clearly established structure to address systemic barriers including self-reflection and interrogation (17). As

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Cukier et al. and Ghebremusse make clear, without accountability, data transparency, and sustained resource investment, transformation remains rhetorical. Institutions must be willing to redistribute power, challenge entrenched interests, and amplify the voices of those most impacted by exclusion.

This reimagined academy is not only possible, but also already being modelled in the mutual aid practices of students, the resistance work of precariously employed faculty, and the critical knowledge produced by community-based scholars. The task ahead is not to invent transformation but to resource, sustain, and institutionalize it. Anything less is not equity, but white supremacy cloaked in moving the needle.

The call to action is clear: postsecondary institutions must choose whether they will remain agents of colonial continuity or become institutions capable of imagining—and enacting—a radically just future.

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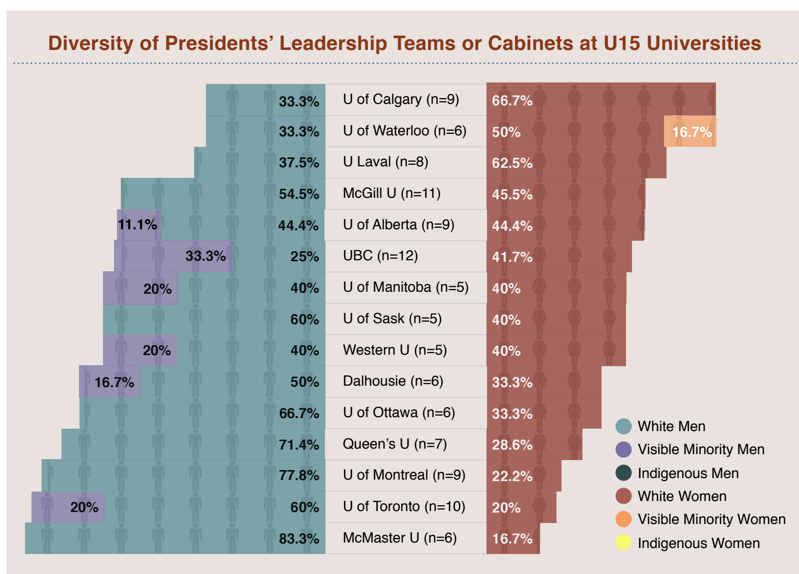
# Appendices

## Appendix 1: The diversity gap in 2019

# THE DIVERSITY GAP IN 2019

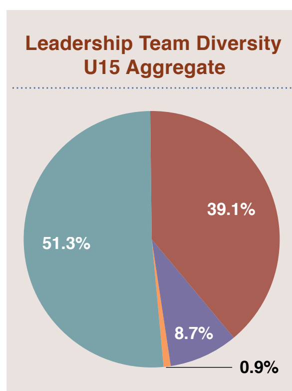
Canadian Universities - U15 Presidents' Leadership Teams or Cabinets (n=114)

Equity ◦ Diversity ◦ Intersectionality




**"Equality in employment will not happen unless we make it happen."**

— Judge Rosalie Silberman Abella, Royal Commission on Equality in Employment, 1985




The executive leadership teams or cabinets of U15 presidents were examined as part of an independent equity audit of leadership diversity at Canadian universities. How diverse and inclusive are the leadership teams -- for example, vice presidents, university counsels -- sitting at the decision-making tables of U15 university presidents? Do such leadership teams model the institutions' expressed commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion? The study examined the representation of women, visible minorities, Indigenous peoples and persons with disabilities. It further disaggregated the data to examine equity at the intersections.

Overall the data show that U15 presidents' leadership teams (n=114) are largely white (90.4%). It also showed that the gender gap is closing (60% male, 40% female). An intersectional analysis further shows that while the gender gap is closing, the women are primarily white. Visible minority women constitute a mere 0.9% of such U15 presidents' executive teams. There is greater diversity among male leaders; however, this is only 40% of the institutions (6 of 15) universities. Over 53.3% (8 of 15) of these leadership teams have no visible minorities or Indigenous peoples on them. Indigenous women and men are notable for their absence, and there is a persistent data gap on persons with disabilities. These data reinforce the findings of a growing number of studies: white women are the primary beneficiaries of equity, diversity and inclusion initiatives at Canadian universities. The U15 presidents' leadership teams do not yet reflect the diversity of the Canadian population.

**To learn more, visit our website at https://uofaawa.wordpress.com/awa-diversity-gap-campaign/**

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Research by Dr. Malinda S. Smith
Graphic design by Dr. Nancy Bray
University of Alberta
June 2019

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