

# From Principles to Action: Collaborating to Create an Inclusive Research Culture

Summary Report of the 2018  
University and Research Funding Agencies'  
Equity Officers Roundtable

EQUITY  
INCLUSION  
RESEARCH  
COLLABORATION  
DIVERSITY  
EXCELLENCE

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# Our values

**It's important that Equity Officers at Canadian universities be included in national conversations about EDI and research funding.**

– Denise O'Neil Green



Denise O'Neil Green, Vice-President, Equity and Community Inclusion at Ryerson University, and founder of the Equity Officers Roundtable.

# Preface

On February 23rd 2018, the first national roundtable of university and research funding agencies' equity officers took place at Toronto's Chelsea Hotel. Hosted by Ryerson University's Office of the Vice-President Equity and Community Inclusion (OVPECI) in collaboration with the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC), the event provided approximately 70 stakeholders from across the province as well as Quebec, Alberta, British Columbia and Nova Scotia the chance to exchange information on research goals linked to equity, diversity and inclusion. Among the participants were equity and senior research professionals who lead or support university research offices, senior university equity officers and professionals from the CRC Secretariat, NSERC, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), the Canadian Foundation for Innovation (CFI), Genome Canada and the Canadian Commission for UNESCO.

The roundtable focused on how to manage the transformational aspects of infusing EDI-informed practices, analyses and objectives in research and research systems through strategies that would better align university and federal funding agency programs, while addressing ongoing systemic tensions and collaborating on common goals. With an emphasis on practical ideas and suggestions, the agenda took advantage of the fact that this was the first occasion when representatives from university equity offices and granting agencies were able to meet in a setting in which open dialogue around EDI was welcome.

How do we raise awareness of and mitigate bias against the research of scholars from underrepresented groups? And how can we help correct the reasons why they are underrepresented in the academy, especially in sciences and engineering? Often because of established norms in the academy and society, these scholars experience barriers and different career paths from what is considered the norm. They are more likely to have taken different pathways in their career, to have had fewer opportunities to publish in top tier journals, to have contributed extensive service work to the research environment, which tends to be undervalued, and to have their work questioned because of their identity.

Initiatives to infuse EDI in knowledge creation and dissemination and institutional practices have met with a range of barriers. So that the sector moves forward on these initiatives, there is a growing consensus that the active participation of all stakeholders is needed. Indeed, one main impetus of the roundtable was to ensure that equity officers in universities could actively participate in the required dialogue.

Accordingly, the roundtable's small group discussions and plenary Q&A sessions elicited spirited feedback. The level of commitment exhibited by participants confirmed a collective belief that, together, stakeholders can effectively address the challenges the sector faces. At the same time, participants did not shy away from identifying areas in need of improvement. Promising practices, resources and possible collaborations were discussed.

The event organizers would like to express their gratitude that so many were able to join this noteworthy conversation and look forward to convening a follow-up event in February 2019.

# Roundtable Format

**This feels like the beginning of a very important collaboration. Universities and agencies need each other to push change.**

– Roundtable participant

The roundtable included three plenary sessions. In the morning, Denise O’Neil Green, Ryerson’s Vice-President, Equity and Community Inclusion, spoke on the challenges experienced by university equity officers, including systemic tensions between universities and granting agencies as well as the impact of organizational structures on accountability. She also stressed the importance of training, data collection and goal-setting, as universities and granting agencies support and align with each others’ change initiatives.

Anne Webb, NSERC’s Senior Policy Advisor on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, then delved into the EDI dimension of research excellence in an inter-agency presentation of EDI frameworks, plans and actions. Her presentation focused on the persistent barriers embedded in research cultures and systems, as well as the strategies and tools that granting agencies are employing to address these barriers.

In the afternoon, Serge Villemure, NSERC’s Director of Scholarships, Fellowships & Equity and Diversity, presented a report on the November 2017 Gender Summit 11 North America organized by NSERC in Montreal. His report focused on the changes required to enhance EDI in research and innovation. He also outlined the extent to which the current model used to evaluate research needs to be creatively challenged.

In addition, two successive sets of concurrent small group discussions took place on a wide range of topics. To ensure the maximum cross-fertilization of ideas and perspectives, these small discussion groups were structured so that each table included a facilitator, at least one participant from both research agencies and universities, and a note-taker. Groups then had a chance to share the points raised in their deliberations in a broader plenary discussion.

To a large extent, the points touched on in the small groups tended to elaborate on and amplify the points made by the plenary speakers. A variety of opinions were voiced throughout the day. However, the overwhelming sense was of a general consensus on the major issues covered. Participants also agreed that the discussions should be summarized and distributed so that the 2019 roundtable will be able to jump off from the conversation launched at this inaugural gathering.



Serge Villemure, Director of Scholarships, Fellowships & Equity and Diversity, NSERC

# Discussion Highlights

*Research is strongest when all people – of all identities – are contributing equitably to the research ecosystem.*

Anne Webb, Plenary speaker

## 1. Significant barriers remain for underrepresented groups.

If there was one overriding theme during the roundtable discussions, it is that despite all the work done in recent years to embed EDI values in Canada's research culture, major barriers endure. Why haven't EDI initiatives had more impact? Many roundtable participants spoke to the resistance these initiatives continue to face. The various forms of unconscious or implicit bias serve as one obstacle to change<sup>1</sup>, as does the tendency to cling to established assessment methods, such that predominant norms that perpetuate a "gender blindness" and "colour blindness" (among others) are presented and perceived as neutral and objective, despite having a bias against forms of research that do not fit with Westernized notions of research excellence.

Plenary speaker Serge Villemure gave a pertinent example. After 20 years of promoting women in the natural sciences and engineering, their representation in these fields has hardly changed. Besides the unconscious biases that intrude on assessment processes, Villemure highlighted biased or incomplete indicators of excellence when evaluating women and underrepresented candidates generally, especially given their disproportionate service roles; prevailing assumptions that equate a "linear" career path as that taken by academics who stay steadfastly within the academic system, and assumptions that this is most desirable; and the fact that women are often steered away from the natural sciences and engineering by gendered and discriminatory language and microaggressions.



<sup>1</sup> These unconscious biases include normative bias, performance bias, confirmation bias, performance attribution bias, personal filters related to the competence/likeability trade-off, and the maternal bias and debasement filter.



*EDI training may be seen as the answer but it is not always the solution.*

Denise O'Neil Green, Plenary speaker

## **2. EDI training needs to be extended in content, reach and impact.**

The traditional means of dealing with equity barriers is through training decision-makers involved in project evaluation and selection. Roundtable participants pointed out potential problems with such training, not least because it may have limited impact in the face of firmly held beliefs and assumptions. Some also mentioned the harmful effects of “training fatigue”.

How can EDI training be made more effective? Participants pointed to the need for multiple approaches and methodologies. One possible enhancement is to reframe training as an integral part of professional development rather than as an optional accompaniment to particular roles and functions. It would also help if training were mandatory for all faculty as well as for funding agencies' program officers. The content of the training itself needs to be expanded as well. Several participants stressed the need to incorporate analysis of systemic issues, power, anti-racism and anti-oppression as essential parts of training content.

*What should granting agencies be accountable for? For holding universities accountable.*

Roundtable participant

## **3. To initiate system-wide change, accountability is paramount.**

Accountability in infusing EDI-informed values, practices and analyses in research depends on demonstrating, in clear and verifiable ways, the achievement of EDI-related goals. These include the increased participation and success of members of underrepresented groups in funding competitions; increased inclusion of EDI considerations in research proposals; and a growing diversity of membership on selection and governance committees. What are the respective roles for funding agencies and universities to ensure these forms of accountability? Agencies must set benchmarks that lend themselves to the public reporting of results and which the agencies themselves feel they can attain. For their own part, universities must craft strategies to meet these benchmarks and engage in the timely reporting of results.

As a practical matter, accountability is closely associated with organizational structure. This is especially true for universities given their organizational complexity, the level of decentralization that tends to mark their operations, and the range of internal decision-makers who have a role to ensure that institutional commitments are met. Roundtable participants were clear in their view that there is a crucial role for equity offices in ensuring accountability in university settings. As one participant put it, “these offices should have the power, accountability and resources to move the equity agenda forward.” One way to accomplish this is by mandating that equity offices gain a portion of the grants received by researchers to support equity initiatives related to the research ecosystem at universities. More generally, equity offices must be involved in every aspect of research decision-making, and the offices' leadership needs to report directly to the university's president or provost.

*Transformational change requires transformational leadership.*

Roundtable participant

## **4. University leadership has a key role to play in EDI initiatives.**

It was repeatedly stressed that university leaders have a significant part to play in the infusion of EDI in the fabric of their institutions. To make this happen, university leaders require customized EDI training that covers not just overall principles, but best practices around compliance. After all, more than anyone else, it is university leaders who hold internal stakeholders to account for embedding EDI principles, analyses and practices. They are also crucial in ensuring that an inclusive environment permeates the entire organization.

University leaders, in tandem with their funding agency counterparts, must also navigate the inevitable systemic tensions that exist as agencies and universities pursue their sometimes divergent agendas. Roundtable participants were unanimous in maintaining that such tensions should not be ignored or swept under the table. As a natural part of the EDI-infusion process, they must be actively overcome through dialogue, strategies and collaboration.

## *Data has the power to change institutional culture.*

Roundtable participant

### **5. The gathering of consistent and accurate data remains a bottleneck.**

Issues relating to data collection and the quality of data collected were repeatedly stressed as a roadblock in embedding EDI values, analyses and practices across the research sector. Common challenges include self-identification surveys with low response rates; resistance from some segments of the research community to participate in these surveys, which could lead to inaccurate results; limitations in the way data is configured, which mask equity-related gaps rather than reveal them; and, finally, resistance to sharing equity data between units that collect the data and those that need to report it, i.e. research offices.

Numerous roundtable participants argued for more guidelines and standardization in data gathering. Many also suggested that the funding agencies are in the best position to collect and store data, as well as to incentivize researchers to submit such information. If the funding agencies do take on this data collection role, they will have to specify exactly what information they need and ensure that it is used consistently while respecting the Privacy Act, with each university's data being shared with that institution to streamline all aspects of decision-making around research funding. For data that continues to be collected by universities, roundtable participants suggested making more effective use of departmentally based champions. The example cited by one participant is instructive. Their university responded in a creative way to the challenge of increasing faculty participation in a self-ID survey. The solution was to promote active outreach by specially chosen advocates across the campus. These advocates encouraged departmental peers to submit.



**Above:** Steven Liss, Ryerson's Vice-President, Research and Innovation, welcomes roundtable participants.

### *We cannot demarginalize EDI without re-defining research excellence.*

Serge Villemure, Plenary speaker

### **6. EDI is an integral component of research excellence.**

All too often EDI-informed analyses and practices are marginalized in the assessment and funding of research. How can this marginalization best be addressed? Roundtable participants pointed to the need to redefine research excellence to harness the benefits of diversity. This means acknowledging how scholarly work is enriched by a plurality of perspectives, practices and ways of knowing. As one participant put it, EDI needs to be a demonstrated qualification for researchers, not just a value. That will happen only if the models currently used to evaluate research are expanded beyond established evaluation metrics, with their focus on standardized quantitative criteria, to include the full spectrum of knowledge and scholarly creation, with an explicit recognition of diverse worldviews, experiences, methods of enquiry, competencies and contributions to research systems and contexts. EDI considerations need to be embedded in the research environment, in the composition of research teams,

in the questions raised, in the methods chosen and in the types of analyses that are undertaken. All this is necessary to enhance the rigour, relevance and innovation of research.

Some roundtable participants mentioned the importance of recasting assessment rubrics to make EDI part of the rubrics' explicit criteria. There was also a discussion of the interview process, with several participants calling for mandatory questions to help gauge candidates' opinions and attitudes towards EDI. This would include the way candidates conduct research and their plans to provide professional opportunities for members of underrepresented groups. The makeup of juries and assessment committees received attention as well. Participants pointed to the need to demonstrate these bodies are assembled with equity and diversity in mind, that EDI considerations are taken into account in choosing the preferred candidate, and to recognize the benefits and strengths of diverse, inclusive juries, selection committees and assessment processes. Participants also noted the need to train selection committees to prioritize, employ and value EDI-related metrics.

*With a triangulation among agencies, government and universities, all three can have a degree of accountability for the outcomes associated with their increased focus on EDI.*

Roundtable participant

## **7. Funding agencies are making strides in developing and implementing EDI frameworks.**

During the course of the roundtable proceedings, it became clear that calls for shared responsibility in developing EDI frameworks are being taken seriously. For example, plenary speaker Anne Webb elucidated how Canada's main federal funding agencies are currently combining their efforts to embed EDI considerations and analysis into their policies, programs and procedures, with each agency developing an EDI action plan, while a range of EDI-related initiatives are being implemented and monitored.<sup>2</sup>

There are signs that these initiatives are having an effect, as evidenced by increases in rates of participation and success in some funding competitions by members of underrepresented groups (to the degree that data exists) as well as a greater inclusion of equity and diversity considerations in some research proposals. At the same time, efforts are being made to ensure selection and governance committees become more diverse. Developing a more comprehensive understanding of research excellence is among the initiatives in the agencies' plans. There has also been greater recognition of institutions making progress in EDI through awards and other forms of acknowledgement. But as was reiterated by participants at several points in the roundtable, these initiatives are only a start. Far more has to be done in order to effect durable and long-lasting change.



Anne Webb, Senior Policy Advisor on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, NSERC.

<sup>2</sup> These initiatives include collecting, analyzing and reporting data on under-represented group participation in funding competitions; monitoring and implementing measures to increase equity and diversity within the pool of applicants and recipients; building awareness, understanding and the integration of EDI analysis and practices throughout stakeholder communities and institutions, and in how the agencies themselves work; embedding EDI considerations so that they are recognized as among factors indicative of research excellence; developing EDI resources, including bias awareness training, tailored to each agency's community of stakeholders; taking steps to eliminate the impact of periods of leave taken and research pace on researcher assessments; reviewing 'use of funds' regulations to clarify that research costs related to increasing EDI are eligible; and consulting with expert EDI advisors.

*How, as a community of stakeholders, do we move from living with government priorities to influencing them?*

Roundtable participant

**8. Embedding EDI in practice: CRC Program.**

Recent innovations by the Canada Research Chair Program (CRCP) are providing a set of practical precedents that could become, with time, a sector standard. As outlined in the roundtable proceedings, the CRCP's EDI action plan is distinguished by its comprehensiveness. It includes explicit EDI and public accountability and transparency requirements for institutions who participate in the CRC Program. It also incorporates a built-in compliance mechanism to ensure that this requirement is being met in a timely fashion and that institutions are held accountable by publicly reporting progress towards meeting EDI objectives. The CRCP-mandated institutional action plans are expected to integrate EDI in all aspects of the recruitment, nomination, retention and renewal of CRC chairholders, along with an explicit acknowledgement that intentional action is needed to remove systemic barriers and promote diverse hiring. The EDI action plan includes built-in compliance mechanisms, such as requiring that institutions meet their equity and diversity targets by December 2019 or the program will not accept new nominations unless they contribute to meeting the targets. Likewise, if an institution does not meet other requirements in the EDI action plan by the deadlines stipulated, nominations will not be accepted unless they contribute to diversification of chairholders.

The CRCP initiative is an important step. Numerous participants pointed out that its provisions are creating a broader understanding of research excellence. The initiative is also providing the ability to recognize and value excellence in different forms. Because of the compliance mechanisms infused in the CRCP's action plan, institutions have an incentive to build on what the CRCP has started. This means developing the institutional infrastructure required to apply the EDI lens. Such an infrastructure can apply not just to CRC appointments but to research positions more generally. In fact, many institutions are actively leveraging the CRC's EDI action plan to broader institution-wide initiatives.

*Conversations are still needed on how to make the invisible visible.*

Roundtable participant

**9. Potential issues still exist for infusing EDI values, practices and analyses system-wide.**

As pathbreaking as the CRCP's framework is, this initiative elicited some criticism during the roundtable proceedings. For example, it was pointed out that many universities have extended their designated groups beyond the CRCP's four – most particularly 2SLGBTQ+ people. This creates potential gaps in the CRCP framework's reach. With different survey methodologies being utilized by various institutions for their CRC appointments, it is difficult to produce system-wide quantitative results, though it was pointed out that the CRCP alone cannot generate this data

It was also mentioned that, based on a growing body of evidence indicating that EDI is critical to excellence in research, the CRCP could implement further measures to ensure a comprehensive definition of research excellence is used. Assessment of the quality of CRCs and their contribution to the research output of institutions continues to be based primarily on bibliometric analysis. The program has required that peer review committee members take an online module on the impact of unconscious bias on peer review. This includes a section on the bias of traditional metrics of excellence. However, because these biases and attitudes are deeply embedded in research culture, it is paramount that more actions are taken to address barriers and to ensure that the work of scholars from underrepresented groups is fully recognized and valued.

Furthermore, the CRCP sets equity targets based on proxies for the faculty representation of the four designated groups, as defined by the Employment Equity Act (women, persons with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples and members of visible minorities). Because the Employment Equity Act focuses on current representation among university faculty, compliance does not necessarily encourage institutions to address the underlying systemic issues that limit opportunities for people from these groups and perpetuate their underrepresentation in university faculty.



*The conversation between universities and agencies is extremely important and we depend on each other as we try to move the dialogue.*

Roundtable participant.

*To ensure best practices are shared, we need a Canadian network of equity officers.*

Roundtable participant

## 10. Sectoral best practices are gradually emerging.

Still, progress is occurring. As universities pursue their own EDI-focused practices in the various areas of research, and align them with funding agency frameworks, best practices are being developed that can be utilized widely across the sector. As an example, the CRCP has produced a best practices document<sup>3</sup> to support institutions as they address their equity challenges. The CRCP’s suggestions are framed as voluntary rather than mandatory, but there is little doubt that the proactive strategies and practices that are emerging will have a system-wide effect as different institutions further refine their EDI-enabling practices.<sup>4</sup>

Universities will also be a source of best practices themselves. Several participants pointed out the need for more explicit collaboration on EDI goals across the university sector. One suggestion, for example, was for the creation of a Canadian network of university equity officers to ensure a more consistent peer-to-peer sharing of information and best practices.

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.chairs-chaires.gc.ca/program-programme/equity-equite/best\\_practices-pratiques\\_exemplaires-eng.aspx](http://www.chairs-chaires.gc.ca/program-programme/equity-equite/best_practices-pratiques_exemplaires-eng.aspx)

<sup>4</sup> The CRCP’s best practices document includes recommendations on identifying ways to provide opportunities to new scholars from equity seeking groups; offering EDI training to highly qualified personnel who may be future chairholders; arranging meetings between university equity officers and CRC hiring committees to discuss hiring strategies that uphold EDI; training for CRC hiring committee members in unconscious bias; developing assessment rubrics incorporating equity criteria, potential interview questions that explore a candidate’s demonstrated commitment to inclusivity, and suggested equity and inclusion language for job postings; designating equity representatives for CRC hiring committees; providing equity and inclusion language for job postings; helping tailor outreach efforts for each research-based hire to maximize the potential of attracting applicants from underrepresented groups; surveying CRC applicants to ask them to voluntarily self-identify as part of equity seeking groups; providing resources and information about assessment methodologies that value diverse worldviews, experiences and methods of scholarly research and creative work; and using applicant self-identification data as appropriate in decision making at each stage of the hiring process.

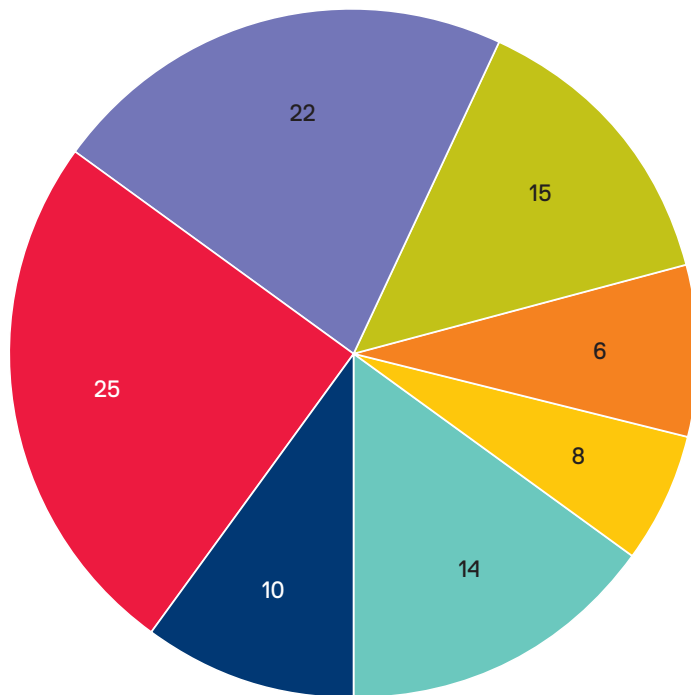
## 11. Next Steps

Participants voiced their wish for a follow-up roundtable next year. Several suggestions were provided for possible topics at this second gathering:

- Establishment of an association of equity officers
- Discussion of the “made in Canada” Athena SWAN (Scientific Women’s Academic Network) initiative being implemented by the federal government
- Updates on NSERC 2020, especially as this plan relates to NSERC’s Framework on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion
- Updates from other granting agencies and university equity offices on ongoing initiatives that could serve as EDI best practices

# Attendee Information

## Roundtable Representation from Various Sectors



- Academic Leaders – 25%
- Equity Officers – 22%
- Funding Agency Professionals – 15%
- Human Resource Professionals – 6%
- Professors – 8%
- Research Professionals – 14%
- Other – 10%

One of the most distinctive features of the roundtable was the extent to which it was able to draw professionals from across many fields in the areas of equity and research from the ranks of both academic faculty and funding agencies. Participants included representatives from the following organizations and institutions: Brock University, Canadian Foundation for Innovation, Canadian Institute for Advanced Research, Canadian Institute for Health Research, Carleton University, Council of Ontario Universities, Fonds de Recherche du Québec en Nature et Technologies (FRQNT), Genome Canada, Lakehead University, McGill University, McMaster University, Mitacs, NSERC, Ontario Society for Professional Engineers, Queen's University, Ryerson University, Simon Fraser University, SSHRC, Trent University, the Tri-agency Institutional Programs Secretariat, Université de Sherbrooke, Universities Canada, University of British Columbia, University of Calgary, University of Ottawa, University of Toronto, University of Waterloo, University of Windsor, Wilfrid Laurier University and York University.

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