



YSGS Dimensions Report

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Prepared by the members of 2020-22 YSGS Dimensions Team



**Toronto
Metropolitan
University**

**Graduate
Studies**

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Executive summary

This report was produced as part of the Dimensions Pilot Program at Toronto Metropolitan University, a program aimed at enhancing equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in all aspects of and endeavours related to scholarship, research and creativity (SRC), as well as addressing and eliminating systemic and structural barriers to engagement in research and scholarship. Through the work of the 17 pilot project institutions across Canada, the nation-wide Dimensions project has the potential to “foster transformational change within the research community at Canadian post-secondary institutions by identifying and eliminating obstacles and inequities” (Government of Canada, 2021).

Accessibility to graduate programs is a key area to explore, when considering how to enhance equity, diversity and inclusion in graduate studies. In this report, we focused on recruitment, outreach, and admissions processes that are in place for graduate programs, on identifying barriers to access for diverse inclusion in graduate education and on exploring initiatives intended to reduce these barriers.

We examine the possibility of new, more inclusive, approaches to recruitment and more holistic approaches to admissions, along with examples of the kinds of important supports that need to accompany students through their academic journey, in order to set conditions for success. As emphasized in the literature and echoed in our consultations and discussions, it is critical to consider not only the admissions processes and practices when developing strategies related to diversity and inclusion, but also the resources and supports provided to diverse groups of graduate students throughout their academic careers.

The intention of this report is to **open up areas for reflection and initiate discussion**, in order for individual programs to carefully consider tangible steps to take in terms of access, equity, diversity and meaningful inclusion.

Outlined in the *Executive Summary* are the key takeaways, as well as the six recommendations arising from this work. In addition, these recommendations are discussed in further detail at the end of the report.

Key takeaways

There are five key takeaways from this report. We hope these can inspire further exploration, discussion and targeted action.

- ❖ A more holistic admissions review process, when done thoughtfully, is viewed as a helpful and inclusive strategy to increase diversity in the graduate student body, and can provide more opportunities for students from traditionally underrepresented groups to engage in graduate studies.
- ❖ In considering changes to the admissions review process, it is important to acknowledge that admission to a program is the first step of many in a graduate career. The conditions for success at each of those steps is important for a more diverse student body. Enhancing tailored supports, providing tangible resources, creating a welcoming and inclusive community, as well as ensuring the availability of dedicated mentors are all important considerations in facilitating the success for students from application to graduation.
- ❖ The importance of early outreach to communicate the pathways to, and value of, graduate education cannot be overstated, and ensuring that outreach activities are done in collaboration with students in early years of undergraduate programs, and with community partners, is key. Providing focused and individualized support from outreach and recruitment, through the admissions process, is important. The availability of current graduate students in supporting roles of “ambassadors” in outreach and the admissions process is a well-supported strategy in connecting with traditionally underrepresented students in graduate programs.
- ❖ Having access to accurate, updated information on applicants and students, as well as data on admission criteria and their relationship to student success, completion, and retention, is necessary in rethinking admissions criteria at a program and institutional level.
- ❖ Consideration of equity-focused initiatives, including revising admissions processes, is ideally undertaken within the context of a broader equity, diversity, inclusion and access (EDIA) strategy, at a program and/or Faculty level. Having a broader, equity-focused and explicit strategy better allows for complementary and coordinated initiatives and programs, as well as measurement and evaluation of outcomes and processes.

Recommendations

The six recommendations contained in this report are aimed at supporting the recruitment, admittance, retention and success of students from equity-deserving groups in graduate studies.

1. Consider adopting a more holistic approach to admissions review for graduate programs.

Adopting more holistic practices in admissions reviews is a positive step towards ensuring a more diverse graduate student body. While the implementation of a more holistic admissions review may look very different for different graduate programs, it may be reasonable to aim to find agreement on what the *guiding principles for holistic admissions review* might be, across programs. As part of a move to a more holistic admissions review process, it is imperative to provide ongoing education, professional development and updated relevant data for faculty and staff.

2. Provide dedicated support and resources throughout the admissions process.

Looking at how we can better support students from equity-deserving groups in all aspects of the admissions process is a logical first step. This will involve examining and revising recruitment and admissions processes, websites and materials and adding targeted outreach and high-touch connections throughout the process, wherever possible. Another recommended strategy is to provide opportunities for current graduate students to act as peer advisors/ambassadors in outreach, and in the application and intake/first year processes. Where possible, recruitment and outreach efforts should begin early in a student's academic career and should be carried out in partnership with community groups and undergraduate programs. Creating purposeful pathways for students from equity-deserving groups to move from undergraduate studies into graduate programs is a proven strategy to help more students from equity-deserving groups consider graduate studies.

3. Provide tailored support throughout the graduate school experience.

While examining and revising admissions processes is an important step to ensuring a more diverse graduate student body, it is also critical that students be supported once they are accepted into their programs. One central priority is to ensure that tailored "wrap-around" academic and non-academic support is provided to students from equity-deserving groups throughout the graduate school experience. This can include programs that provide writing or academic support, that offer coaching or leadership mentoring and targeted funding opportunities aimed at students from typically underrepresented groups. This requires active and ongoing collaboration with other units within the university—for example, the Academic Accommodations Support team—to ensure that graduate students with disabilities/disabled graduate students have the full range of supports available to them from admission to graduation. In collaborating with other student service units at the university, consideration should be given to enhancing current offerings geared specifically at graduate students from underrepresented and equity-deserving groups, in an attempt to not only provide focused support, but to help graduate students build peer networks and communities of support.

4. Enhance mentorship opportunities and programming tailored to support students from equity-deserving groups.

Recommendations here include continuing active collaboration with other units in the university, including the Tri-Mentoring program in Student Life and Support, to promote opportunities for students from underrepresented groups to engage in mentorship, as both mentors and mentees. Research suggests that the development of mentorship programs which allow for undergraduate students from equity-deserving groups to have mentors who are upper-level graduate students and faculty members will enable these students to consider the possibility of pursuing graduate studies as a future academic option. Supporting the recruitment and hiring of diverse faculty members and subsequent membership in YSGS is important not only for formal engagement in graduate studies, as well as in supervision and teaching, but also to provide opportunities for mentorship.

5. Create a welcoming and purposefully inclusive university graduate student community.

Recommendations here include working to ensure that all spaces at the university are welcoming and inclusive, this includes in-person/on-campus spaces as well as online spaces. Ensuring that information is provided in a variety of accessible formats, that contact information is provided for individual follow-up and questions, as well as ensuring that images are diverse and inclusive, are all important in creating a welcoming online presence. Additionally, ensuring a web resource that reflects and makes explicit the YSGS commitment to EDIA, including making note of initiatives and resources available to students, would help create a sense of safety and belonging for students from equity-deserving groups. A welcoming and inclusive community is one in which graduate students are also able to explore a diversity of experiences, approaches and worldviews. Exploring and establishing EDIA-focused academic courses, curricula and programming that can capture the interests and needs of graduate students from equity-deserving groups is another important recommendation. One final recommendation is to consider the co-development of equity-based competency workshops or modules for all graduate students, in order to improve their understanding of inclusion. This could have short- and long-term benefits, helping prepare them to be more attentive to EDIA in their environments and to create more inclusive spaces in their future scholarly work and careers.

6. Advocate for and actively engage in the establishment of an institutional EDIA strategy or framework to support and sustain equity-focused initiatives, across the university and within YSGS.

The importance of an institution-wide EDI commitment and strategy to guide, support, and sustain equity-focused activities and initiatives at the Faculty and program level cannot be overstated. At the YSGS level, we would recommend establishing a *YSGS Vice-Provost and Dean's EDI Advisory Committee*, with a specific focus on the admission, retention, experience and engagement of graduate students from equity-deserving groups, in order to help ensure a focus on equity across all YSGS-led activities, programs and initiatives.



I. Introduction

“The Dimensions program is intended to publicly recognize post-secondary institutions seeking to increase equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in their environments and across the research ecosystem. The program objective is to foster transformational change within the research community at Canadian post-secondary institutions by identifying and eliminating obstacles and inequities. This will support equitable access to funding opportunities, increase equitable and inclusive participation, and embed EDI-related considerations in research design and practices” (Government of Canada, 2021).

The Dimensions Pilot Program began in September 2019, with 17 post-secondary institutions from across Canada. Each institution committed to collecting and analysing qualitative and quantitative data to explore and reflect upon their institutional and environmental culture, systems, practices and policies that are relevant to engagement in research, scholarship and creative activities that make up the research profile and ecosystem of the institution. The data should be used to help illuminate barriers, obstacles and inequities in access and involvement in activities and opportunities in research endeavours. This is with a goal to not only identify and describe these types of barriers, but to put in place tangible and responsive initiatives to address and eliminate them.

The [TMU Dimensions Pilot Program](#) is led by Director Dr. Art Blake, and consists of a Dimensions Faculty Chair from each of the university’s six Faculties, as well as a chair representing the Library and YSGS. Each of the Faculty Dimensions Chairs has a small team typically made up of students who support their work. The YSGS Dimensions Team, part of the overarching Dimensions Project, currently consists of the Dimensions Faculty Chair (Associate Dean, Student Affairs), the YSGS Administrative Coordinator, and two graduate student members.

II. Background

In line with the national Dimensions Pilot Program’s objective “to foster transformational change within the research community at Canadian post-secondary institutions by identifying and eliminating obstacles and inequities” (Government of Canada, 2021), the YSGS Dimensions Team began its work in 2020. Given the structure of the university, and the function of graduate studies within the institution, the decision of the YSGS Dimensions Team was to focus their work on examining admissions to graduate studies at TMU, including the policies, practices and norms that guide admissions processes. Access is often inadequately highlighted in discussions of equity, diversity and inclusion in graduate education. The application process, as a means of access to graduate school, is therefore a principal consideration and the focus of this report.

In this report, we will focus on recruitment, outreach and admissions processes that are in place for graduate programs, on identifying access barriers for diverse inclusion in graduate

education, and on exploring initiatives intended to reduce these barriers. We will examine the possibility of new approaches to recruitment and admissions, along with examples of important supports that need to accompany students through their academic journey, in order to set the conditions for success. As Kent and McCarthy note in their 2016 report on holistic admissions practices in graduate schools, “It is critical to think beyond the admissions process when developing strategies for diversity and inclusion. Ideally, recruitment processes, admissions processes, and strategies for supporting student success should be mutually reinforcing” (p. v).

Throughout the report, we will use terms such as “traditionally underrepresented” and “equity-deserving groups.” We have purposefully sought to make primary use of the term “equity-deserving,” rather than “equity-seeking,” to identify those who may experience marginalization and who also face structural and systemic barriers, not only in access to graduate studies, but in other contexts of their lives and experiences (Tettey, 2019).

The federal Dimensions Charter refers explicitly to recognizing, confronting and countering systemic barriers experienced by “underrepresented or disadvantaged groups including, but not limited to “women, Indigenous Peoples (First Nations, Inuit and Métis), persons with disabilities, members of visible minorities or racialized groups, and members of 2SLGBTQIA+ communities” (NSERC, 2022). In considering who may be underrepresented in graduate studies, we can, as a start, refer to a review of Canadian literature over the past 25 years on representation in postsecondary education. Merner and Beatty-Guenter (2018) identify some of the groups who have been traditionally underrepresented in postsecondary education, including the following:

- Individuals who are racialized, who identify as being part of a minority group, or who identify as Indigenous;
- Women (in specific contexts), 2SLGBTQIA+ persons, and those who may face other gender-based role barriers including persons with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics (SOCIESC);
- Individuals with a disability, including physical, development and cognitive challenges;
- Individuals who, as children or youth, were part of the care/foster care system, those who are recent immigrants or who may have a migration background (Mishra, 2020), as well as those who may have English proficiency barriers;
- Those from low-income or low socioeconomic status backgrounds, first generation learners, those who have poor family support for engaging in graduate studies, and those who may be from rural areas.

It is important to note two things. Firstly, there is very little demographic data collected on those who apply to graduate school. There are limited means to track, specifically for equity-deserving groups, those who are accepted versus those who are rejected, and on various measures of progress and success (e.g., grades, retention, honours and awards, accomplishments, time to completion). So while we have access to data such as the [2019 Student Diversity Self-ID Report](#), and other non-institutional sources, such as the Canadian Universities 2019 [Equity, Diversity and Inclusion at Canadian Universities Report](#), there is a lack of accurate and

complete datasets to help us more precisely and completely identify underrepresented groups, and to link other measures and outcomes in order to make conclusions and to drive change. Challenges related to the lack of accurate and up to date information is identified in almost every discussion of EDI initiatives in graduate studies, and addressing this gap is a key priority to move meaningful equity-focused initiatives and programs forward. Secondly, it is important to also note that while we sometimes speak of “underrepresented groups” in graduate studies in this report, it must be kept in mind that unique discipline-specific demographic data and representation challenges need to be identified, discussed and addressed at program and Faculty levels.

There is much to be done, in terms of both thinking through and taking action to address, the structural and systemic barriers that many students from traditionally underrepresented groups face in terms of access to graduate education across all programs. The intention of this report is to help open up areas for reflection and discussion, in order for programs to carefully consider tangible steps to take in terms of access, equity, diversity and meaningful inclusion.

III. Approach

In Fall 2020, the YSGS Dimensions Team began a thorough scan of external resources relevant to the topic of access to graduate education for individuals from equity-deserving and under-represented groups.

A consultative process was also undertaken, and the YSGS Dimensions Team invited a number of key groups and individuals working in relevant areas to a focused discussion. These included consultations with: the researcher team members and representatives from [TRSM Indigenous Initiatives](#); student members of the [National Forum on Anti-Asian Racism](#); representatives from the [Positive Space Faculty and Staff Network](#); as well as members of the Faculty Working Group (a sub-committee of the [Presidential implementation committee to Confront Anti-Black Racism](#)). Additional consultations were carried out with the executive of the newly formed Toronto Metropolitan University Graduate Student Union, with graduate student members of other Faculty Dimensions Teams from across the university, and with the YSGS admissions staff, who, as part of their roles, interact with potential applicants across all graduate programs.

In fall 2021, a special edition of GRADCafé was dedicated to a rich discussion on “creating a more inclusive and accessible graduate experience”. The GRADCafé event, held once a semester and co-hosted by the Vice-Provost and Dean, and the Associate Dean, Student Affairs of YSGS, is typically a semi-structured conversation with graduate students about how to make their experience more engaging, positive and relevant, and seeks students’ active involvement in finding solutions to challenges.

Members of the Dimensions Team also attended a number of graduate student town halls held by other Faculties, and the YSGS Faculty Dimensions Chair had access to aggregate data from the Dimensions Graduate Student survey, carried out in the 2020-21 academic year.

IV. Literature review

A review of the literature and research on accessibility to graduate education was conducted in order to explore and document key barriers to accessing graduate studies for individuals from equity-deserving and underrepresented groups.

The results of this review reflect two important realities. First, students from equity-deserving groups are often underrepresented in graduate education, generally, and are more likely to face distinct challenges, structural and systemic barriers in the admissions process. Second, students from equity-deserving groups who gain entry to graduate programs often face unique barriers, again including structural and systemic barriers, in navigating through their graduate education.

These following *challenges* and *barriers* were identified, in the literature review:

1. The application process can involve potential challenges, and may be perceived as a barrier.

- Applications and admissions practices may favour students with socioeconomic privilege (Posselt, 2014).
- The steps and processes involved in compiling and submitting an application may be overly complex to navigate, or unclear to those who might have limited previous relevant experiences, or who do not have access to academic mentors who can provide guidance and advice throughout the process.
- Students who may require accommodation in elements of the application processes (e.g., in-person or virtual interviews, or timed testing such as situational judgement tests) may not have clear information available to them on how to seek accommodation as a part of the process (Martin et al, 2011).
- An emphasis on grades and grade-point averages as key criteria, without additional contextual considerations or inclusion of other aspects of applicants' strengths, competencies or experiences, might be a reflection of limited access to resources rather than an accurate representation of ability, capacity, or intelligence (Miller, 2013).
- Applicant resumés and curriculum vitae that include unpaid internships, relevant pastimes, or volunteer experiences, rather than being clear predictors of success in graduate studies, may instead reflect financial freedom and opportunities to which economically marginalized students do not have reasonable access (Glauser, 2020).

2. There is often a lack of targeted recruitment and outreach that locate underrepresented groups, cultivate partnerships and address diverse experiences (Michalski et al, 2017; Smith, 2018).

- Institutions should constantly evaluate their outreach plans and recruitment strategies with diversity of potential applicants in mind (Martin et al., 2011).

- Institutions and individual programs should also consider specific strategies to locate applicants from underrepresented groups and provide tailored help for these students throughout the application process.
 - Strategies might include pipeline programs, conferences, or targeted mailing/digital outreach to communities (Thompson & Campbell, 2013).
 - Targeted visits and informational campaigns can present graduate school as a viable choice to underrepresented groups (Griffin & Muniz, 2011).
- Institutions should consider the use of more inclusive messaging in an attempt to attract applicants from underrepresented groups and communicate what the institution can offer to such potential students.
- In some cases, potential students might be dissuaded from applying due to both financial and social pressures. For example, graduate school might not seem a financially viable option; applicants (especially mature applicants) might have caregiving or family responsibilities; students from backgrounds underrepresented in academia might not feel comfortable in academic culture (Griffin & Muniz, 2011; Cassuto, 2019; Kniffin, 2007).

3. A lack of mentorship and diverse faculty representation can discourage a more diverse applicant pool and hinder recruitment of students from equity-deserving groups (Cassuto, 2019).

- Access to graduate education is improved with the assistance of a mentor, who can advise the student on the utility of a graduate degree, help pinpoint research interests, and guide students through complex application processes.
- Students from equity-deserving groups might look for mentors or supervisors who share socio-cultural knowledge and beliefs, and who might represent the promise of a more safe and equitable student-faculty dynamic (Hones et al., 2018).
- Diversity in the ranks of faculty and staff can be indicative to applicants of a more inclusive institution and allow potential students to envision themselves as part of the academic culture and university community.

4. A focused approach to admissions to graduate education that primarily emphasizes quantitative criteria may, in some cases, reflect the privilege and social capital of applicants, rather than serve as a predictor of success in graduate studies. A more holistic approach to admissions; one that considers both quantitative and qualitative aspects of the application package, is considered a more effective strategy to diversify graduate education and to better understand predictors of graduate program success (Posselt, 2014; Griffin & Muniz, 2011; Kent and McCarthy, 2016; Kent and Thompson & Campbell, 2013).

- Faculty members involved in graduate admissions may place a disproportionately heavy weight on quantitative or numerical indicators of student merit, such as grade-point averages and other scores, as an objective “first cut” that results in potentially worthwhile applications never being reviewed (Posselt, 2014, p. 493).

- Reliance solely or very significantly on numerical scores as a measure of individual merit may further disadvantage individuals from equity-deserving groups. For many of these individuals, such numeric indicators may be a reflection of access (or lack thereof) to resources, rather than an accurate representation of individual merit, ability or potential (Miller, 2013; Posselt, 2014).
- Faculty members involved in graduate programming may feel that numerical indicators are objective predictors of graduate student success, and may be primarily focused on the goal to recruit students who are predicted to be better prepared for the rigour of graduate studies, who may require fewer supports, and who will complete the program in a timely way (Posselt, 2014).
- Institutions should ensure that faculty and staff who are involved in admissions practices have education, support and resources related to diversity initiatives and EDI considerations in admissions. In some cases, faculty members may be disconnected from or resistant to the effort to change institutional culture or may be committed to previously ingrained standards of applicant evaluation (Posselt, 2014; Griffin & Muniz, 2011; Thompson & Campbell, 2013). In other cases, faculty and staff may feel that they do not have the knowledge, resources or time required to engage in a more holistic review of applications (Kent & McCarthy, 2016). Providing professional development, relevant data and resources to programs, faculty and staff to enable a more holistic approach to admissions is an important step.
- An important consideration is avoiding a common narrative about applicants from equity-deserving groups as having lower potential or capacity, rather than as potentially having had access to fewer opportunities in their journey to apply for graduate studies.

5. Unfamiliar or unsupportive educational environments may have a direct effect upon student retention and success (Kniffin, 2007).

- Academic culture thrives on exclusivity and privilege and, as a result of that, spaces can feel hostile to diversity, or obtuse to varied experiences and backgrounds. Students and faculty from equity-deserving groups may experience a need to constantly monitor their behaviours and self-presentation, or to dissemble, in order to be taken seriously in certain spaces and settings and in order to avoid feelings of “otherness” (Stone et. al, 2018, p. 513).
- Students might not feel represented in positions of prestige or authority on campus (Cassuto, 2019).
- Potential students should be able to observe and experience tangible, tailored and action-oriented supports (including financial supports) that are made explicit and transparent and that identify diversity as a key value and priority, rather than seeing diversity surfacing only in rhetoric or messaging (Griffin & Muniz, 2011).

6. The cost of a graduate program can be experienced as a barrier to applying for graduate studies.

- The ability to invest financially in pursuing a graduate degree is an economic privilege; potential applicants might view graduate school as a financial risk (Kniffin, 2007).

- Students from underrepresented backgrounds might feel an exceptional need to prove their worthiness of receiving financial support from the institution, thus heightening a sense of “imposter syndrome” (Stone et al., 2018).
- Financial limitations may have impeded applicants’ previous academic successes, and may have limited their opportunity to cultivate the kind of impressive or “well-rounded” CV that often affords applicants greater chance of being considered not only for entrance into graduate school but for awards, scholarships and bursaries.

V. Environmental scan

In addition to an exploration of the literature on accessibility to graduate education for individuals from equity-deserving and underrepresented groups, we also conducted an environmental scan to explore other institutional initiatives, commitments and strategies for recruiting and supporting more diverse graduate students, across programs and disciplines, including holistic admission practices.

While our literature review identified a number of barriers (such as obscure application processes that are difficult to navigate, a lack of targeted outreach, a narrow focus only on specified quantitative criteria in admissions reviews, lack of representation and mentorship in graduate programs, unwelcoming and non-inclusive environments and the high cost of graduate school), our environmental scan was intended to explore how institutions and graduate programs are working to try to address some of these barriers.

Through our environmental scan, we explored equity-focused initiatives at the institutional and program level, as well as those specific to the admissions process.

In this section of the report, we will present a selection of findings from **institutional EDI strategy documents** that provide an underpinning or foundation upon which new approaches to admissions can be based. We will then discuss a selection of **equity-focused admissions initiatives** at Canadian graduate schools. We also discuss such initiatives undertaken at Canadian medical schools, as such initiatives aim to diversify medical education and provide opportunities to traditionally underrepresented groups. Finally, we will present current perspectives on **holistic admissions strategies** in graduate education, and discuss the importance of data to help support strategic admissions initiatives.

1. Institutional EDI strategies across Canada: A selection of examples

At the institutional level, a number of universities are now creating and publishing institutional EDI strategy documents that provide a description of values, principles and guidance for internal equity-focused initiatives and programs. Many of these documents include detailed strategic goals for specific units and processes (e.g., admissions, student funding, campus climate), with measurable outcomes and evaluation processes. These institutional-level strategy documents provide a foundation for programs, units, and departments to set relevant goals and targets that can then be linked to broader institutional equity-focused strategic goals.

At the program level, we examined several equity-focused graduate school admissions initiatives and programs, as well as what it means to take more “holistic” approaches to

admissions. This examination also includes a spotlight on some of the unique revisions to admissions processes in Canadian medical schools, as well as a focus on holistic admissions review – what this means, and how it works. We also explored how some institutions are working to enhance the availability of tailored support for both applicants to, and current students of, graduate programs, in particular those from equity-deserving groups. It is important to note that this is not an exhaustive list of all equity-focused initiatives and programs, but rather a selection to introduce some key ideas and considerations.

Many universities have overarching institutional EDI strategy documents or strategic plans that explicitly outline the institutional values, principles and commitments pertaining to EDI. Along with articulating the values and principles that underpin strategy and guide outcomes, many of these plans also outline key areas where EDI-focused initiatives and programs will be put in place, how they will be measured and evaluated, with clear timelines for achievement of success. While few of these strategy documents speak directly to graduate studies, they provide clear direction for and are relevant to graduate programs and schools.

The following is a selection of findings from EDI strategic plans, from universities across Canada.

The McGill University [EDI Strategic Plan](#) (2020-25) provides a five-year plan for implementing specific goals, reflecting an institutional commitment to EDI, across five dimensions, including the student experience, research and knowledge, outreach, the workforce and the physical space. Goals related to the student experience include: increasing diversity in the student body; enhancing student wellness and success supports, in particular for those students from underrepresented groups; raising awareness regarding the lasting effects of systemic and structural barriers; ensuring students' EDI concerns are addressed meaningfully and enhancing the capacity for faculty and staff to create and sustain inclusive and respectful learning environments. Relevant to the graduate student experience as well is the goal to ensure and maintain inclusive and respectful research environments across the institution.

At the University of Alberta, their 2019 [Strategic Plan for Equity, Diversity and Inclusivity](#) is organized around five themes: Vision and leadership; research, teaching and public service; Workforce (all faculty and staff); students, research trainees and student life; and climate. Within each of these five themes, the plan outlines measurable goals, deliverables and outcomes, accountabilities and “benchmarks for excellence” (p. 9) over a three-year period.

The [Cyclical Program Review: Promoting Equity](#) document from the University of Waterloo provides a short, but reflective checklist for programs and departments to assess and strengthen equity, diversity and inclusivity across five areas: learning environments; recruitment; mentorship; training; and welcoming spaces. This document provides a set of reflective bullet points to help departments and programs describe how they are working to promote equity, and also identify where improvements or enhancements need to be made. Questions such as those asking departments to describe efforts to recruit students from underrepresented groups and tangible efforts to diversify curricula to include perspectives and scholarship from underrepresented groups, help to provide departments with important opportunities to both reflect and to strategize.

McMaster University's [Towards Inclusive Excellence](#) offers a detailed overview of the institution's EDI strategic planning, which contains six broad objectives. These include: enhancing the understanding of inclusive excellence; further development of systems to support evidence-informed EDI-related planning and decision making; further inclusivity and interdisciplinarity in curricula and programs; enhancement of inclusive leadership capacities through ongoing professional development; more consultation with and supports for those from equity-deserving groups; and increased recruitment and retention of students, faculty and staff from underrepresented groups. Strategic action plans and short-, mid- and long-term goals are outlined for each objective, with clear accountabilities, and implementation "teams" responsible for actions and evaluation. For example, the Graduate and International Student Experience Implementation Team have the responsibility to, among other goals, assessing and enhancing the graduate and international student experience and supports, for ensuring EDI training for graduate faculty and Graduate Assistants, reviewing admissions practices and processes and enhancing mentorship programming and opportunities. Built into the strategy document is a performance management plan, including an overview of metrics and key performance indicators (KPIs), as well as other planning and evaluation tools.

The [Diversity and Inclusiveness Strategy](#) at Dalhousie University provides a framework towards achieving diversity goals across four broad and intentional areas of activity: climate and intergroup relations; student access and success; education and research; and institutional viability and vitality. The strategy includes plans for purposeful recruitment of students from historically underrepresented communities into both undergraduate and graduate programs, additionally, the enhancement of pathway programs, needs-based bursaries, merit-based scholarships and focused growth of transition and support services for students from equity-deserving groups.

Queen's University provides yearly progress reports on initiatives and updates in the areas of EDI and Indigenization. As an example, their 2019-20 report, [Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Indigeneity \(EDII\) 2019-20 Annual Report](#) provides information on how the university has invested resources and is committed to enhancing accountability and leadership in furthering EDII through four metrics: the diversity of the student body; retention rates of students from equity-deserving groups; the diversity of the institution's faculty and staff; and the diversity of Canada Research Chairs. Some examples of the university's commitment to EDII, as outlined in the report, include its continued recruitment of faculty from equity-deserving groups at rates beyond workforce position availability, as well as enhanced access of students from equity-deserving groups through various pathways. One such pathway is the new Promise Scholars Program, which provides first-generation students with comprehensive financial, transition, and career support. The school also welcomed its first Indigenous Provost and Vice-Principal (Academic) in March 2020, and implemented new EDII pedagogy and practice modules to support faculty members on the exploration of topics including power, privilege, recognizing bias, decolonization and creating more inclusive classrooms.

2. Equity-focused Initiatives at Canadian universities: A selection of examples

There are many indications that there is interest, across Canadian postsecondary institutions, in revising graduate school admissions processes. These revisions aim to include more “holistic” approaches and enhance the availability of tailored support for both applicants to, and students in graduate programs, in particular those from equity-deserving groups. The following include a selection of examples of equity-focused initiatives and programs that have been put in place in graduate schools and programs across Canada.

The Master of Physical Therapy [program](#), and Occupational Therapy Master of Science program at the University of Western Ontario reserve a selection of seats each year for Indigenous students. Applicants to these programs must identify as Indigenous and provide documentation, while also meeting requisite GPA requirements and scoring highly in evaluations by reviewers. In addition, Western Law provides an [LSAT Preparation Course for Black, Indigenous, and Low-Income students](#) as part of a broader initiative to provide additional support to applicants who identify as Black, Indigenous or needing financial support.

At Queen’s University, the “[Indigenous Student Admission Regulation](#)” program offers graduate student applicants the opportunity to self-identify as Indigenous and have their “academic, cultural, personal, and professional background” holistically considered as part of the admissions review process. Additionally, by self-identifying as Indigenous applicants, students are also then eligible for a number of targeted [funding opportunities](#). The school’s [Society of Graduate and Professional Students EDII and International Students Guide](#) offers newly appointed faculty or graduate student volunteers support in serving students in a manner that meets the school’s EDII goals and objectives.

In 2021, the Department of Psychology at the University of British Columbia (UBC) introduced a [Diversity Mentorship Program](#) for senior undergraduate students from “diverse, under-resourced, traditionally underrepresented, and/or marginalized backgrounds,” who are interested in applying to research-focused programs in psychology. The program provides information on the experiences and expectations of graduate school, provides individualized support during the preparation of application materials and navigation through the processes of applying and provides funding support to cover application fees for some participants. Similarly, the UBC Physics and Astronomy [LaunchPad](#) program provides focused support for “women or non-binary, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), 2SLGBTQIA+, living with disabilities, and/or are in the first generation in their family to attend university” who are also interested in pursuing research-intensive graduate studies in physics or astronomy. These programs not only provide inclusive and welcoming support for applicants from traditionally underrepresented groups in these fields, they also provide opportunities for current graduate students to serve as mentors and informal advisors.

3. Equity-focused admissions Initiatives at Canadian Medical Schools

Of interest are some of the equity-focused initiatives at medical schools across Canada. While not considered formally as a graduate program, many medical doctor (MD) programs have taken purposeful steps to increase diversity in applicants, and provide opportunities for individuals from traditionally underrepresented groups in medicine, to access medical education. These steps have often been driven by societal demand; by a need for more diverse medical practitioners to serve in diverse communities; and by motivation to address the existing structural and systemic barriers to medical education. Furthermore, there is a clear acknowledgement of the social determinants of health and illness, and the subsequent importance of ensuring that “..the inside [of the medical profession] reflect[s] better the outside.” (Saleem Razack, Chair of the Association of Faculties of Medicine of Canada Network on Equity, Diversity and Gender, as cited in Glauser, 2019).

For a number of years, Canadian medical schools have been adjusting and rethinking admissions practices in order to increase diversity in medical school cohorts (Glauser, 2019). These changes are intended to offer greater opportunity to a more diverse pool of applicants by recognizing that there are varying and diverse pathways to education and acknowledging the systemic and structural barriers to academic achievement. In particular, many of these initiatives are aimed at addressing economic and financial disadvantages (*ibid*), in the recognition that admissions standards are often tailored to those with more or greater economic resources and privilege.

New and revised admissions requirements are meant to identify and locate capabilities that are well-suited to the program; while also allowing the applicant to contextualize their grades and academic history; and their abilities as learners to better highlight their suitability for a career in medicine. A number of medical schools offer tailored and separate admissions processes specifically for Indigenous and Black applicants. Criteria such as interviews, personal essays and autobiographical statements have been integrated into many medical school admissions processes to allow applicants to articulate and describe a wider variety of skills, competencies and life experiences. Finally, a number of medical schools have worked to adjust weighting of academic and non-academic criteria, to consider applicants more holistically. The sections below will provide some specific examples of current programs and initiatives at medical schools across Canada.

At the Schulich School of Medicine and Dentistry and the University of Western Ontario, the admissions criteria for grades has been adjusted to include a broader range of grades for consideration. In addition, their selection process takes into account both academic and non-academic factors and includes an opportunity for applicants to share their life experiences through autobiographical sketches and interviews. In their published [Diversity](#) statement, the school has identified a commitment to recruit and retain learners from four identified diversity categories, including: (1) Indigenous populations, (2) females, (3) individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and (4) individuals from rural communities (Schulich School of Medicine and Dentistry, 2022).

At the Max Rady College of Medicine at the University of Manitoba, applicants are provided with a questionnaire in the application process that includes scored questions based on potentially marginalizing experiences, including questions related to migration and refugee status (Glauser, 2019). Along with a number of other medical schools including the Faculty of Medicine at the University of British Columbia, the University of Manitoba includes an Indigenous Interview Panel for applicants who self-identify as Indigenous. This process typically includes only Indigenous panel members, including Elders, and provides opportunities for applicants to share unique life experiences; to reflect on what has brought them to the application process; and to discuss how they have demonstrated attributes such as determination, resilience, and compassion within their lived experiences. Additionally, volunteer student and Elder support is available to all Indigenous applicants as they navigate through the admissions process.

At the University of Saskatchewan College of Medicine, through their “Diversity & Social Accountability Awareness Program,” six spots are reserved annually for admission to the program for applicants with a lower socioeconomic background (Glauser, 2019). Applicants are evaluated based on targeted questions that seek to illuminate their status and socioeconomic experiences; questions involve family income, disability, parents’ education, rural location, etc. These answers are later tabulated so that scores can be used as data in the admissions process.

The “Access to Medicine” program at the Université de Montréal works to locate potential students through community outreach; this involves, for example, visiting high schools in what are considered underrepresented and underserved communities, and offering workshops to students on the experience of being in medical school (Glauser, 2019). This program also provides full funding for two students with demonstrated financial need, and offers relatively more latitude with academic scoring in its evaluation of applicants. Through this, the university seeks to attain a more holistic vision of the applicant which might provide better insight into their capabilities and strengths as a potential medical student.

The University of Toronto (U of T) MD Program has put in place a number of tangible initiatives aimed at improving the application process for equity-deserving and underrepresented students, as well as offering key resources and support targeted toward specific groups. The [Black Student Application Program](#) (BSAP) invites Black Student applicants to submit their applications through a specified program in which their candidacy is reviewed by a designated panel made up of Black faculty, students and physicians. Applicants are also required to submit an essay describing their choice to apply through BSAP. In addition, the [Indigenous Student Application Program](#) (ISAP) provides those applicants who self identify as Indigenous the opportunity to submit a personal essay. These applicants can also request to have their admission file and interview reviewed by an Indigenous community member.

Finally, one noteworthy initiative is the [Community of Support \(COS\) program](#) at U of T, which provides targeted support for applicants who identify as Indigenous, Black, Filipino, economically disadvantaged or as having a disability. This initiative aims to provide resources and increased access, which includes one-on-one admissions assistance and support through

each stage of a complex application process. Through a partnership with the Association of American Medical Colleges and the Association of Faculties of Medicine of Canada, they also provide financial support to students who would be otherwise unable to take the MCAT (Medical College Admissions Test) without additional funding support. Medical students and physicians are recruited as volunteers to support the work of the COS program, and the “high-touch” relational approach that includes individualized advice and support. This initiative was raised in a number of our consultations as a strong positive example of meaningful and tangible support for applicants from equity-deserving groups, leading to successful admission to medical school.

4. Holistic Admissions Review Processes

Kent and McCarthy (2016) define a holistic approach to admissions as “...the consideration of a broad range of candidate qualities including “noncognitive” or personal attributes, [and] a growing strategy for widening the evidence base that graduate programs consider when evaluating a candidate for admission.” (p. iii). Also, Smith (2018) describes a holistic admission application review process as one that looks at all materials and information that an applicant provides, that involves reviewers understanding unconscious biases and one that acknowledges and aims to address inequities in access to opportunities and advantages.

Kent and McCarthy (2016) go on to note that two driving motivations for a holistic approach to graduate school admissions include (a) concerns that a sole focus on quantitative criteria such as grade point average (GPA) is not predictive of success in graduate programs and (b) a need to ensure the predictive accuracy of the criteria, skills and attributes that are assessed and subsequently correlated with success in graduate school. A holistic approach to admissions posits that consideration of standardized scores, tests and grade point averages alone can fail to capture not only what applicants bring to the application process but also what predicts their success in graduate school and eventually as part of a professional workforce (Glazer et al., 2014).

A holistic (or ‘whole file’) review applied to graduate school admissions processes is viewed by many as a potential countermeasure to potential biases applied in admissions processes, both explicit and implicit (Wilson et al., 2019). A holistic approach to admissions supports inclusion of qualitative criteria earlier in applicant screening, in addition to past academic performance and test scores. In many cases, a holistic approach may put more weight on the experiences, attributes and diverse skills of applicants; with an understanding that there is a range of applicant preparation and pathways to graduate school that might be predictive of success.

Holistic approaches to admissions also serve to avoid what Kyllonen (2011) and colleagues refer to as a fixed or persistent assumption that quantitative criteria are the sole predictor of success in graduate programs. As a way of countering this assumption, a holistic approach aims to avoid a sole focus on any one portion of the admissions application and instead it allows for consideration of a broader set of criteria.

The literature outlines a few key considerations in adopting a holistic admissions review process. First, it is imperative that graduate schools and programs, in aiming to adopt holistic approaches to admissions, tie their objectives and aims to broader equity-focused strategic goals as outlined by the institution (Kent and McCarthy, 2016). Grounding goals and objectives to align with broader university equity-focused goals provides clear and compelling motivation for holistic admissions review. It also supports the reconsideration of admissions processes from a perspective of equity, diversity and inclusion. The advantage of a more holistic approach to admissions, however, extends beyond the imperative to diversify our graduate student body. Given that research has demonstrated that test scores and GPAs are not sole predictors of student success, a holistic approach may actually benefit *all* applicants to graduate programs, and may contribute to overall student success and retention (Glazer et al., 2014, Kent and McCarthy).

There are acknowledged challenges in aiming to adopt a more holistic review process of applications. One key challenge is defining a holistic approach clearly and in a way that can be applied or adopted across diverse graduate programs with unique and specific admissions criteria. Many graduate programs may feel they already practice a more holistic approach, given the lack of consensus on a clear definition shared by all. As Kent and McCarthy (2016) note, graduate programs often vary in their idea of what it means to adopt a holistic admission review; with some stating that it involves simply reviewing more than standardized scores; some stating that it involves an evaluation of how an applicant can potentially contribute to a more diverse campus environment or program and still others noting that it may involve explicit consideration of demographic characteristics, such as race, or gender expression. The current reality of graduate admissions is also such that, in most institutions, academic programs are responsible for setting specific criteria and making decisions regarding admissions to their own programs (Kent and McCarthy, 2016). While it may be possible to reach consensus on the key principles and goals of a holistic approach, it may be more difficult to achieve consensus on how such an approach can be implemented across programs, given the unique context of each program's faculty perspectives, available seats, applicant pools, etc. As Kent and McCarthy go on to explain, outlining a foundational set of best practices on what a holistic approach involves, rather than striving to reach a shared definition across programs, would provide much-needed pragmatic guidance to graduate programs in moving forward with more holistic admissions practices.

The second challenge is that there is limited time for faculty and staff to engage in admissions review processes. A holistic approach arguably requires more time, more effort and more complexity as it is, ultimately, a more comprehensive review process. Some applications that may have previously been eliminated early in screening may, in a holistic admissions process, be considered for longer in the process, beyond initial screening. Adopting a holistic approach to admissions may result in changes to the review process that might be viewed as less efficient, and that require more time and discussion among those responsible for admissions review. Only considering applicants that meet a strict cut-off score for GPA, for example, allows for a more efficient and streamlined review process, while a holistic approach is likely to increase the

number of applicants in the pool for consideration – thus the need to ensure time and support is provided to those involved in a holistic review process.

Another challenge may be that faculty committees and reviewers responsible for admissions review may not feel they have the necessary tools to evaluate qualitative aspects of applications such as lived experiences, personal attributes and non-cognitive traits, such as resilience, tenacity, or self-discipline. Without widely available, reliable and valid tools to help measure and appraise these traits, many faculty reviewers may be understandably reluctant to consider these traits or attributes in the review process (Kent and McCarthy, 2016).

Finally, there may also be objections to considering a more holistic approach to admissions review, with concerns that this represents a “lowering of standards” or that students will be admitted to graduate programs without adequate academic preparation, and subsequently will be unsuccessful (Posselt, 2014). It is important to note that a holistic approach does not remove quantitative criteria such as GPA or standardized test scores, but considers these alongside applicants’ unique experiences and preparation, as well as, in some cases, non-cognitive attributes, and demographic characteristics (Kent and McCarthy, 2016).

5. The importance of data

In both a review of the literature and a scan of other institutional initiatives, commitments and strategies for taking a more holistic approach to admissions, and for recruiting and supporting more diverse graduate students, the importance of having current and accurate data cannot be overstated. As the Universities Canada report *Equity, Diversity and Inclusion at Canadian Universities* states, “The collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data are needed to be able to identify existing strengths and barriers to advancing equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) on campus, to develop plans, policies and practices to address the barriers, and to monitor and report on progress.” (2019, p. 24).

As with any strategy, equity-focused programs and initiatives require planning, investments, resources and ongoing evaluation. In order to carry out each of these activities thoughtfully and carefully, access to accurate and relevant data is imperative. Data are required to back up decisions, to drive the allocation and investment of resources, as well as to provide benchmarks by which to evaluate programming for impact. While predicting the future is challenging, data provide the best information by which to predict trends, and serve to help justify the allocation of time and resources in times of constraint.

In discussions of what types of data can best help underpin equity-focused initiatives, there are a number of areas in which it is acknowledged that we lack the accurate and up-to-date data that we would ideally like, to help with decision-making and resource allocation.

The types of data that are needed go beyond demographics and numbers, while acknowledging that accurate numbers are an important starting point. Having a better understanding of

applicant and current student demographics through self-identification, along with information about their subsequent experiences (e.g., GPA in program, time to completion, post graduation success), would provide helpful information to programs and the institution. In particular, having information about demographics of the applicants as well as those students who are admitted to the programs, would better allow for a careful examination of current assumptions regarding which applicants are most likely to be successful, and if these assumptions truly are supported by the data (Kent and McCarthy, 2016). In other words, better and more data that may help to make links between admissions criteria and student success, as defined specifically by individual programs and more generally by institutions, is key in helping to determine whether and how to move forward with a more holistic approach to admissions review processes (Kent & McCarthy, 2016).

Rich data also allows for the engagement in intersectional analysis to “examine how relationships among different identity factors shape individuals’ experiences of inequality and discrimination” (Library of Parliament, 2017, para. 3). How individuals identify is deeply complex, and considering diversity narrowly or with attention only to a single trait, fails to acknowledge the complexity of identity. For graduate students with overlapping and interconnected social identities, if we view diversity narrowly or without an intersectional lens, we may fail to acknowledge the reality of their lived experiences, along with the challenges and barriers they have navigated to enter graduate studies, and then encounter, once there.

In addition to demographic data, collecting subjective data on the experiences of graduate students from application to graduation, in particular those from equity-deserving groups, would help to better understand the kinds of challenges and barriers that these students face, in order to then address them and put solutions and support in place. As Sukhai (2016) notes, while there is preliminary data, for example, on the number of graduate students in Canada who choose to identify as having a disability, we have very limited information on the specific challenges and barriers that graduate students with disabilities face, as well as their experiences in all aspects of graduate education.

While there is some positive progress being made on collection of self-identification data in graduate program contexts, challenges to collecting these data from applicants and current students remain. Without absolute clarity and trust on how self-identification data may be used, individuals may be understandably reluctant to disclose their information. Ensuring adequate human resources to collect, analyse and make self-identification data available is necessary, and with current economic constraints, may be challenging. Other challenges may also present barriers to collecting self-identification data, including worry over what terminology to use and the competing demands of collecting other kinds of data from students and contributing to survey fatigue and lack of responsiveness across all kinds of data collection exercises (Universities Canada, 2019).

VI. Consultations

Starting in early 2021, the YSGS Dimensions Team consulted with a number of key groups from TMU that might offer insight into barriers to graduate education. These groups included: the Project Lead and representatives from [TRSM Indigenous Initiatives](#); student members of the [National Forum on Anti-Asian Racism](#); representatives from the [Positive Space Faculty and Staff Network](#); as well as members of the Faculty Working Group (a sub-committee of the [Presidential implementation committee to Confront Anti-Black Racism](#)). Additional consultations were carried out with the Executive of the newly formed Toronto Metropolitan Graduate Student Union (TMGSU), with the graduate student members of the Faculty Dimensions Teams from across Faculties, and with the YSGS Admissions Team members, who, as part of their roles, interact with potential applicants across all graduate programs.

A list of set questions was developed by the YSGS Dimensions Team and was sent to groups prior to each meeting. No preparation was required; however, groups were asked to consider the questions according to their own experiences. These questions were:

1. From your experience, and what you know of the experience of students from equity-deserving groups, what are some barriers (e.g., processes, requirements, and policies) to applying for, and being admitted to and supported in graduate studies?
What type of outreach/proactive work/initiatives could we consider to help reduce these barriers?
2. From your perspective, and what you know of the experience and perspective of others, what are some positive initiatives or facilitators (e.g., processes, requirements, and policies) that may encourage more young people from equity-deserving groups to apply to, and be admitted to graduate studies?
3. What types of tangible support would be helpful to consider putting in place for students from equity-deserving groups once they are in graduate studies to (a) set the general conditions for their success, and (b) facilitate their involvement in SRC activities?
4. In terms of providing support and breaking down barriers for students from equity-deserving groups to consider, apply for and be successful in graduate studies --- what would a re-imagined future look like, from your perspective?

Each consultation was unique in its focus and the direction of the conversation, resulting in a variety of topics being discussed and explored. Across consultations, a number of critical themes emerged consistently and spoke to common concerns and shared ideas for the future. These critical themes are outlined and described below:

1. Reflecting on and revising admissions processes is an important first step

A key theme from all consultations was the possibility of rethinking admissions processes and procedures, with a goal of better attuning these application processes to the needs of individuals from equity-deserving groups. Our consultations found a general consensus that new strategies and criteria need to be developed that can help to capture students' diverse experiences in their academic journeys and in their potential pathways to graduate education – in other words, a more holistic approach to graduate school admissions.

In addition to considering a more holistic assessment of graduate school applicants, there are other suggested revisions to the admissions process that came out of our consultation, including adopting a more high-touch and individualized approach to admissions and to interactions with potential applicants. Rather than a series of standard responses to inquiries or directing applicants to websites and online FAQs, a recommended approach includes making efforts, wherever possible, to tailor responses to individual inquiries through all phases of the application process. Ensuring recruitment and admissions events are accessible for all potential applicants, through providing support such as closed captioning, remote interpretation for online events, and sign language interpretation for in-person events are steps to help make these events more inclusive and welcoming. Working to ensure a variety of modalities for recruitment or admissions events (holding them both online and in-person, or at different times during the day and evening, recording events or short recruitment videos for applicants to watch on their own) may also help make them more inclusive and accessible.

Other recommendations include working with community groups and partners to collaborate on recruitment events, where there are already established safe and supportive spaces for potential applicants. This may include considering outreach through informal undergraduate clubs or university community groups. Finally, those consultants emphasized that the application process can be difficult to navigate for many potential applicants, and efforts should be made to make instructions as clear and transparent as possible, with individualized support and tailored outreach available.

Outreach efforts should communicate the kinds of equity-focused supports that are available to students, including information on student groups, networks and resources. Additionally, accessible information on scholarships and financial support, mentorship and resources which can support individuals from equity-deserving groups to consider pursuing graduate education, should be easy to access and prominently displayed on web pages for potential applicants. Creative ways to engage in outreach include graduate experience roadshows or information sessions with community partners for first-generation students in which existing graduate students who are members of equity-deserving groups can share their experience and advice with potential applicants. Recruitment programs such as the [iDiversity Ambassadors](#) at the University of Washington Information School, connect current graduate student volunteers with potential applicants who identify as Black, Indigenous, racialized and those from other underrepresented groups. The iDiversity Ambassadors share their own experiences and perspectives on graduate studies, and offer advice in areas such as the application process,

how to reach out to potential supervisors and faculty members, and how to create a research plan.

One final point of discussion was raised in a number of our consultations. In some cases, applicants who are provided with an opportunity to self-identify as being from an equity-deserving group, in the admission process or in funding applications, may also be asked to provide detailed information about their lived experiences; how they have demonstrated tenacity or resilience or how they have successfully faced challenges or confronted systemic or structural barriers. While the intention of asking these types of questions may be to allow potential applicants to articulate their strengths, it can also be experienced by applicants as re-traumatizing, due to the need to reiterate difficult, deeply personal and often traumatic experiences in an admission or funding application process. In both of these processes, careful consideration should be given to the purpose of asking for self-identification, what additional information is requested and why and how that information is used.

2. The importance of mentorship

An emphasis on the importance of **mentorship** in graduate studies highlights ways in which effective mentors can be critical in attracting applicants and retaining students from equity-deserving groups. While mentorship can occur informally between peers and through community engagement; institutions should consider more formal ways in which faculty members can reach out to and actively recruit potential applicants, and take part in cultivating pathways to create meaningful and sustained supportive connections.

Our consultations highlighted the importance of mentorship, alongside and connected to a need to work towards more diversity in our faculty and staff. While positive and engaged mentorship, generally, is highly valued and viewed as a facilitator of success in graduate school, ensuring that students from equity-deserving groups have access to diverse supervisors, role models and mentors is an important and critical priority. Graduate students who may find themselves navigating hardships or facing barriers may find it difficult to seek help if they do not feel they have a mentor who has some contextual understanding of their life experience, their social or ethnic background. Mentors may provide a safe space for students to be validated, to talk openly about challenges and to help strategize solutions. In some cases, that safe space may be created by a shared or deeper understanding of the systemic and structural barriers that many individuals from equity-deserving groups face in graduate studies and academia generally.

Three examples of programs providing this type of tailored support are offered by the Tri-Mentoring Program (TMP) at TMU. The First Generation Programming and Community Outreach program supports first-generation undergraduate students as they navigate through the university experience, providing information about funding opportunities, creating a support network and providing opportunities to have a peer mentor. Race Forward, an initiative supported also by the TMU career and Co-op Centre, provides career advising, networking and mentoring opportunities, as well as professional development for Black undergraduate students. Finally, the Group Mentoring initiatives provided by the TMP offer safe and supportive spaces

for students who identify as a member of an equity-deserving group to feel a stronger sense of belonging and community, and to have a place to share concerns, experiences and successes. Group Mentoring is currently available, for example, for students who identify with a disability, Muslim women students, 2SLGTBQIA+ students, Filipino students and Black students.

In 2020-21, a collaboration between the TMP and International Student Support resulted in a successful pilot mentoring program specifically for international graduate students (Koranne & Jankowski, 2021). Recognizing the burden of COVID-19 restrictions for international graduate students, and the isolation of studying remotely and often in other countries, this program matched mentees with mentors through a carefully curated process, and held events and programming on their online community platform, that allowed students to build connections and a network of support. Continuing to extend these types of tailored, community-building programs further into the graduate student space would help create the inclusive, and supportive environment that is described as deeply important for student success.

3. Creating a welcoming and purposefully inclusive university graduate student community

Many of our discussions focused on the importance of an inclusive community for all students, with the underpinning idea that *community* can be understood as a place where one feels a sense of belonging, of connection and value. Creating supportive spaces for students from equity-deserving groups is an important part of a meaningful graduate student experience. These spaces are vital to help create connections among graduate students, and with university community members, including faculty and staff, who might share experiences and perspectives, act as key resources to help address challenges, and identify potential supports.

In consultations, graduate students discussed their stories of seeking “safer spaces” to navigate challenges, or to ask difficult questions, and they reflected on what resulted when these community “safer spaces” were not available or accessible. Some described the challenges of bringing concerns or worries to faculty members or administrators who might not understand the context of their concerns, and subsequently feeling dismissed or doubted. These feelings inevitably resulted in a student being less likely to raise similar concerns or questions in the future. Having diverse faculty members from equity-deserving groups is imperative for many reasons, including and importantly to ensure there are diverse role models and appropriate resources in place. Graduate students seeking support as they move through their graduate academic journeys may feel more comfortable turning to a faculty member or staff member with whom they can identify. In addition, enhancing the diversity competencies of all faculty and staff will help students from equity-deserving groups feel more welcome, even in spaces where diversity may be currently lacking.

The idea of welcoming and inclusive safer spaces pertains not only to in-person and on-campus experiences and locations, but also to online spaces, including websites for graduate programs, websites with admissions information and those that host important information for graduate students, including funding opportunities, guidelines and policies. Ensuring that websites include images that are clearly inclusive and diverse, as well as information that is easily accessible,

with contact information for follow-up questions, is important. Having a web presence that reflects visible inclusion and highlights commitments to EDIA, with accessible tailored resources (both academic and non-academic), contributes to the idea of what it means to be a safer, accessible and welcoming university community.

The creation of welcoming and inclusive spaces goes beyond the Faculties and programs, and must extend into all aspects of the university. Attention to equity, diversity and meaningful inclusion must also be demonstrated in, for example, the governance bodies of academic institutions, including representation on university senates, and governing councils. At Queen's University, for example, their Senate and Governing Councils have taken steps to enhance the diversity of their membership, to embed EDI in all practices, policies, procedures and to increase awareness of EDI in all functions of the governing bodies (Queen's University, 2020).

Students from equity-deserving groups, and first-generation graduate students may experience unique challenges in graduate studies, and may not have familiarity with navigating complex environments and processes to seek advice and help as they navigate the complexity of graduate studies. While having mentors, faculty and staff to go to as resources, it is also important that the university consider providing tailored support to students from equity-deserving groups, and have welcoming spaces where students are comfortable to bring their concerns and questions. While the university may be seen as a diverse space, this may not be the reality in particular departments, programs or Faculties, and diversity in terms of representation may be viewed through a narrow lens (e.g., viewing diversity from a single perspective of race, ability, age or gender identity). Further, viewing diversity narrowly or with attention to single attributes, alongside the effects of exclusion or marginalization based on an individual trait or attribute only, may mean a failure to view diversity through an intersectionality lens, and a failure to recognize overlapping and interconnected social identities. A student who identifies, for example, as a racialized woman who identifies with a disability may face a number of complex and unique challenges, systemic and structural barriers in navigating graduate studies. Taking steps to ensure that equity, diversity, inclusion and access initiatives, such as creating welcoming and safe spaces and providing tailored supports, are mindful of all types of diversity, is imperative. A limited view of diversity will not serve to create safe and inclusive environments, but instead, may serve to potentially further marginalize individuals and groups.

The Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development and the Office of the Under Secretary at the US Department of Education report, [Advancing Diversity and Inclusion in Higher Education](#), highlights clear recommendations on the ways that post-secondary institutions can enhance diversity, promote access and inclusion and reduce barriers for traditionally underrepresented students. These recommendations include ensuring a strong institutional commitment on EDI and to promotion of student body diversity; early outreach, support and recruitment of prospective students from diverse and underrepresented communities; providing comprehensive support services for students (e.g. ensure thoughtful approaches for incoming students; providing mentoring and coaching opportunities for first-generation students); offering on-campus support and summer bridging or preparation programs; supporting students to meet financial and other needs with advisors who have small

case loads and can provide responsive and individualized support; and looking at ways to establish an inclusive and safer campus climate for students.

A welcoming and inclusive community is one in which graduate students are also able to explore a diversity of experiences, approaches and worldviews. Creating spaces where EDIA can be a meaningful focus and a broader diversity of perspectives, experiences and scholarship can be explored is part of creating that community. To that end, exploring and establishing EDIA-focused academic courses, curricula and programming that can capture the interests and needs of graduate students from equity-deserving groups is an important consideration.

One leading example of such programming is the [Black Studies Minor](#) for undergraduate students, launching in fall 2023, an interdisciplinary minor exploring the “...histories and cultures of Black diasporas, ideologies of anti-Black racism, themes of Black resistance to oppression and exploitation, and the range of political strategies and community-based mobilization tactics Black activists and their allies have employed to counter systemic and institutionalized oppressions and fight for social justice.” (TMU, 2021). As noted in the [Anti-Black Racism Campus Climate Review Report](#) (2020), one of the key concerns students from across programs brought forward was the lack of programming reflecting the Black Canadian experience, studies and scholarship. This minor serves an important role in also creating space for Black students and scholars to connect, and to build community.

Finally, the work of equity, diversity, inclusion and access is work for everyone in the university community, and a key part of a welcoming and inclusive community is one with a strong sense of awareness of EDIA issues and concerns as well as a willingness to take part in meaningful action to further equity-focused initiatives. Ensuring that faculty members and staff have access to current, ongoing professional development in learning about EDIA is imperative. In addition, another recommendation is to develop equity-based competency series for graduate students to engage in, together, to improve their understanding of diversity, equity and inclusion and prepare them to create more inclusive spaces in their research, their scholarship and careers.

4. Creating purposeful pathways to graduate school can help, alongside focused early outreach

The need for adequate mentorship and community also underscores an interest expressed in consultations in pathway programs as a viable method of recruitment and retention. Purposeful recruitment of students from traditionally underrepresented groups in graduate studies alongside opportunities to access pathway programs, as well as tailored supports, constitute a wraparound strategy for addressing underrepresentation of many groups in graduate studies. Providing early and sustained outreach and support may provide young people from equity-deserving groups with the social capital needed to make a pathway to graduate school a reality.

Discussions explored the need to engage in outreach as early as possible as a first step, to provide information on and encourage undergraduate students to begin to consider graduate school as a viable option in their academic career. Emphasized in a number of consultations

was the need to better communicate the potential benefits of graduate school, keeping in mind the diverse backgrounds, experiences and perceptions of those from equity-deserving groups for whom graduate studies may not be an obvious choice, including those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged, or are first-generation post-secondary students. In our consultations, there was discussion of the stereotypes and assumptions regarding graduate education as a financial drain, as an opportunity only for a small percentage of high-achieving students, or as serving little purpose or practicality, as a career pathway. Discussion also emphasized the fact that many students from equity-deserving groups may face the challenge of having to determine the opportunity costs and return on investments of a graduate education. The value of communicating the potential opportunities and benefits of graduate degrees, as well as highlighting graduate studies as more accessible for students from equity-deserving groups, rather than an unrealistic, elite or impractical option, is an important first step in early outreach.

In addition to communicating the value of a graduate degree, creating outreach opportunities and program pathways that engage high school and undergraduate students in learning about research, and hearing from current graduate students may allow those who may not have previously considered graduate school as a possibility, to now view themselves as potential graduate students and researchers. In our discussions, many also identified that this outreach ideally should begin as early as possible in high school, when students are making critical decisions about pathways to post-secondary education. One good example of early outreach is the [SciXchange program](#) at TMU, which offers a variety of unique outreach opportunities for youth in an attempt to recruit and retain more students from traditionally underrepresented groups in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Through programs like summer camps, and events held in partnership with elementary schools, high schools and community centres, SciXchange serves to open up opportunities to students who might otherwise not access careers in science, making STEM education and pathways more accessible, inclusive and welcoming.

The idea of providing targeted support and pathways to graduate school is not a new one. In 2010, the Aboriginal Transitions: Undergraduate to Graduate (AT:U2G) [portal](#) was established, as a support for Indigenous students seeking to explore the possibility of graduate studies. The portal has a variety of focused resources for Indigenous students at all phases of their potential graduate school career: from access, to application, first year to graduation. Resources include detailed and thoughtful guidance on, for example, considerations when thinking about graduate school as an option, application preparedness, how to seek funding opportunities, creating realistic timelines and working with a supervisor.

Targeted and early outreach is an important method of introducing the idea of graduate school as a possibility for students from many underrepresented groups. Five important ideas were emphasized across our consultations. First, outreach efforts must begin as early as possible. Second, outreach programs work best when they are done in partnership with community groups, schools and with already-existing programs, and in collaboration with community leaders and mentors. Third, the ideas of equity and inclusion must be integrated into outreach

programming from the beginning, as part of the foundational values, rather than as something added on. Prioritizing engagement of those from traditionally underrepresented, and equity-deserving groups, should be a clear focus of engagement activities and initiatives. Fourth, engagement works best when it is not a “one-off” event, but rather, like many SciXchange programs, part of an ongoing and sustained connection and relationship between potential students and programs. Finally, targeted outreach of individuals from traditionally underrepresented groups in graduate studies must also be accompanied by tailored and accessible supports and programs available to them from outreach to application, through programs to graduation. Creating a roadmap of engagement and support for students from equity-deserving groups – from outreach to graduation – is key in order to set the conditions for their success.

5. Targeted and tangible supports must be made available

Many of our consultation discussions focused on what types of tangible and focused supports are important for the success of students from equity-deserving groups in graduate studies. While tailored mentorship opportunities, and safer and welcoming spaces were emphasized as important, tangible support, in particular funding support, was viewed as key. A number of interviewees noted that practical concerns such as being able to cover tuition and living costs are often primary factors for members from equity-deserving groups to determine if they would consider pursuing graduate education. In discussions, it was reiterated that financial precarity can often intersect with marginalization experienced by individuals from equity-deserving groups. Our discussions focused on the following: the need for more targeted funding opportunities for students from equity-deserving groups; the need to ensure funding information is readily available and accessible to applicants and students; the work needed now to review and revise existing criteria for funding opportunities; and, finally, the importance of continuing to ensure a baseline of financial security for all graduate students.

Thompson and Campbell describe three practices as an important part of a strategy to attract and retain graduate students from underrepresented groups. Two of these practices include providing personalized student supports and offering non-credit skill-based modules to address potential “preparatory gaps” (p. 21), and to supplement academic work and training (2013).

In a scan of Ontario graduate programs academic supports, we found that these types of supports, and supplementary programming aimed to not only guide students toward the successful completion of academic requirements, but were also focused on enhancing community networks, building communication skills, and cultivating professionalization and career pathways.

This scan also uncovered a noticeable gap, however, in the tailoring of these supports toward graduate students from equity-deserving or underrepresented groups. While graduate academic support is frequently purported to address areas of academic, professional, and collegial concern for graduate students, there is a lack of recognition in these types of general programming that these areas of concern may be uniquely experienced by students from

diverse backgrounds, and that there may be a need for specialized programming or guidance. In addition, resources and programs are often advertised more generally, and many do not recognize a potential need for more direct outreach and specialized pathways to participation for students who may need these programs the most.

Gearing specific academic support toward equity-deserving students can create further opportunities to help cultivate an inclusive and diverse community of support among graduate students while simultaneously supporting students in achieving academic goals and milestones. Given that this external scan revealed that academic support was frequently offered through student-directed workshops and study groups, one can imagine inclusive and equity-oriented programming that can be led by students from equity-deserving groups, and that builds more inclusive and stronger peer networks among equity-deserving graduate students. Furthermore, academic supports that offer guidance toward career professionalization and improving research communication can incorporate the specific challenges and barriers faced in academia by students from equity-deserving groups, and address the need for mentorship and direction that incorporates the diverse lived realities of students navigating graduate studies.

VII. Supports and resources currently in place

There are a number of key institutional resources currently provided by both the university and YSGS that offer support for current graduate students and are of interest to current applicants who might seek information on available programs and practices. An overview of these established resources can provide insight into how current graduate students from equity-deserving groups might presently engage with both general and more tailored supports.

Academic Accommodation Support (AAS)

At TMU, Academic Accommodation Support (AAS) is designated to work with students and faculty in order to facilitate reasonable and appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities. This service connects students with front line staff, Student Accommodation Facilitators, who create each student's individualized accommodation plan, which is then available to be distributed to instructors and faculty. This is a vital campus support and key touchpoint for student accessibility at TMU. AAS serves both graduate and undergraduate students.

For graduate students, AAS is the sole support service at the university dedicated toward creating formalized, official plans of accommodation that can allow for documented and collaborative communication between graduate students and faculty members as it pertains to disability disclosure. Furthermore, the use of AAS services creates a vital link between the graduate student and the institution; it is the means through which to register as a graduate student with a documented disability requiring academic accommodations. The maintenance of this line of support and ongoing outreach from this service to the graduate student is significant in that it serves to potentially mitigate further barriers or challenges.

While the importance of AAS involvement to support graduate students who identify with a disability cannot be overstated, it remains a challenge to translate and apply traditional concepts of accommodation into the graduate student experience, and non-course degree requirements, defined in TMU Senate [Policy 164](#) as “...graduate seminars, theses, major research papers, major research projects, comprehensive/candidacy examinations, dissertations, and required certifications.” (2020, p. 10). A current YSGS priority is ensuring that continuing work and efforts are taken to articulate how academic accommodation and support can be extended through non-course degree requirements. This work, building on the recommendations from the 2020 YSGS report, [Academic accommodations for graduate students outside of courses](#), represents an important step forward to helping address barriers many graduate students with disabilities face.

Student Life and Learning Support

The [Student Life and Learning Support](#) unit houses a number of unique programs that offer tailored support for students from equity-deserving groups, including the Black Student Experience and Race Forward, First Generation Programming and Community Outreach, career-, group- and peer-mentoring through the Tri-Mentoring Program.

Student Life and Support also provides alongside academic support tailored to graduate students. For example, their Writing and Language Support program provides focused academic support aimed at graduate students, including workshops and programming on: Effective academic reading; getting started on an academic paper; ethical scholarship for graduate writing; writing a literature review; an introduction to writing about research methods; writing proposals and applying for funding and writing a scientific research article. The Writing and Language Support program also provides one-on-one writing support for graduate students, through individual appointments. Finally, Student Life and Support are also exploring a pilot program for dissertation coaching over the 2021-22 academic year.

The Tri-Mentoring Program offers different levels and types of mentorship for students. These options include career, group, and peer-to-peer mentorship. The Tri-Mentoring program matches first year students with a mentor and/or group, and aims to guide participants toward their academic goals and/or advise them amidst any challenges in their academic or career pathway. Relevant resources and supports are also provided to aid students and mentors through the mentorship journey.

Group mentorship programs are offered for students from equity-deserving groups, including one launched in 2021 for Indigenous students. Participation in group mentorship programs aimed at students from equity-deserving groups is offered as a means to cultivate community among peers, and to create space for equity-deserving students to share their common experiences and work together towards goals of academic success. Facilitators are also members of equity-deserving groups.

Peer-to-peer mentoring programs recruit upper year undergraduate students as mentors to first year students. Career mentorship is available to students in third year and above who wish to participate as mentees, and who are matched with an “industry professional”.

While overall, TMP has been tailored towards the undergraduate experience, there is a recently developed graduate pilot program, started in 2021, in partnership with the Graduate Leadership Institute entitled [GRADMentors](#), which involves pairing an undergraduate student with a current graduate student at YSGS. Mentorship involves biweekly meetings and attendance at events. This program addresses key concerns relating to equity-deserving graduate students that were raised in consultations and research, which include:

- positioning graduate school as a possible and viable option for undergraduate students;
- combating isolation and developing early connections and a sense of safety and community;
- cultivating mentorship and guidance before, and during the graduate school application process.

In the 2022-23 academic year, members of the Faculty Working Group of the Presidential Implementation committee to Confront Anti-Black Racism, the TMP and YSGS are piloting a program called the Black Graduate Career Mentorship Program. This program aims to match Black graduate students with a faculty mentor to advise and provide guidance on navigating graduate studies and research and knowledge dissemination opportunities, networking and career advising. This pilot, along with some of the other tailored mentorship and programming, can serve as strong examples of the value of increasing specific offerings aimed at supporting graduate students from equity-deserving groups. These kinds of opportunities can also address a critical need for graduate students to both find mentors and develop a vision of their trajectory through graduate school and beyond.

Toronto Metropolitan University Aboriginal Student Services

[Aboriginal Student Services](#) provides programs, outreach, advice and critical resources for incoming and current Indigenous students at the university. The Aboriginal Student Services team helps to direct students toward relevant resources both on campus (e.g., the Aboriginal Education Council, Indigenous Student Association), as well as key off-campus, external community resources, services and organizations aimed at Indigenous persons. For incoming students, Aboriginal Student Services provides a Student Digital Handbook that welcomes Indigenous students to the university and outlines relevant information and resources, and also provides a webpage on funding opportunities, scholarships and bursaries central to Indigenous students. They provide individualized support for learning about the university for new Indigenous students, completing funding applications, and academic referrals. Furthermore, Aboriginal Students Services offers regular events throughout the year aimed at developing a sense of community, sharing knowledge and heightening cultural awareness.

Key programs provided by Aboriginal Student Services include:

Peer Support for Indigenous Students

The Aboriginal Peer Supporters is a team of Indigenous students who perform outreach, and orientation to the university, while also connecting other Indigenous students with resources and to their community on campus. Students can participate either by accessing services and supports, and also as peer advisors.

Tea N Talk

The [program](#) helps build a stronger sense of community for Indigenous learners, facilitates important discussions, and cultivates sustained collaboration and support between Indigenous students and the Aboriginal Student Services program team.

Writing Workshops for Indigenous students

Writing workshops for Indigenous undergraduate and graduate students aim to improve critical writing skills relevant for assignments and to meet expectations in courses and in non-course requirements. As well as helping students find ways to integrate Indigenous knowledge and experience into their writing, these workshops also aim to help Indigenous students at all levels develop enhanced study and time management skills.

While these programs clearly provide valuable support for Indigenous students, at this point they are inclusive of both graduate and undergraduate students. It may be helpful to consider additional and enhanced offerings aimed solely at Indigenous graduate students in supporting their writing, and studies in both graduate courses and milestones.

Student Financial Assistance

Incoming graduate students can expect the provision of a baseline [funding](#) package, with limits and conditions, that can be balanced against tuition fees owed. Funding packages vary by program and student status, and may be administered through scholarships, bursaries or through assistantships.

Additionally, students have the opportunity to apply independently for specific scholarships and bursaries. There are currently two award programs offered by Yeates School of Graduate Studies that are specifically geared towards students from equity-deserving groups. The [Indigenous Graduate Student Awards](#), and the [Black Graduate Student Awards](#) provide a number of award opportunities, including bursaries, scholarships, and fellowships, on an annual basis, to Indigenous and Black graduate students. Currently the provision of these awards involves evaluation of an application to demonstrate financial need, alongside academic achievements. The [Supporting Aboriginal Graduate Education Award](#) (SAGE) is an annual award donated to the university, intended to support Indigenous students successfully completing graduate studies, with an aim to contribute to an increase in the number of Indigenous people seeking academic careers.

TMU and YSGS websites as resources

For potential applicants to TMU, the official website is often the first point of contact and an accessible portal into information and resources. The [Graduate Studies](#) website and in particular, the [Future Students](#) section, provides a general overview of key information including application instructions and admissions; funding information; events and resources; community and faculty member profiles; as well as specific program listings with links to schools and departments.

There is a separate, featured section for [Indigenous Graduate Education](#), which includes access to the YSGS Framework for Truth and Reconciliation, campus services and specific funding opportunities. This tool allows future Indigenous students to envision themselves at the university and understand that institutional support has been made available.

The YSGS website offers critical, early information to applicants who might be interested in how the school appears 'student ready' and able to meet needs of inclusivity and support for equity-deserving students. High-touch information and practices made available and easily accessible online would indicate an early capacity to address these needs and situate YSGS as an accessible option to individuals from equity-deserving groups.

VIII. Current Admissions Processes and Practices

In graduate studies, programs determine what specific criteria will be applied in applicant screening and application reviews, being mindful of what skills, competencies and backgrounds are most likely to position students for success.

The YSGS [Admissions Requirements](#) webpage for prospective students states that YSGS admissions works towards "maintaining high-quality graduate and professional programs and to offering admission to those applicants that are best qualified and most likely to succeed in these programs", and further states the *minimum* GPA requirements for all Masters and Doctoral programs across graduate programs. This information page also offers links to program-specific requirements and further instructions for applicants, explicitly noting that some programs may have high minimum GPA requirements. Links to FAQs, to a GPA calculator and to procedures for submitting documents are also available.

While application and admission requirements at YSGS vary across programs, applicants are typically required to submit: academic transcripts, letters of recommendation (academic and/or professional), and for some programs, a statement of interest, a sample of written work or a focused portfolio.

To date, most programs do not typically ask for students to self-identify from an equity-deserving group, nor are unique or tailored admissions processes provided in a scan of programs. At an undergraduate level, the TMU Midwifery Education program offers candidates who self-identify as Indigenous, First Nations, Métis or Inuit an opportunity to participate in the

Midwifery Education Program's (MEP) Indigenous Admissions Process (IAP), a voluntary program intended to maximize opportunities for Indigenous applicants to be accepted into the program.

Many graduate programs are highly competitive, and given that, it is a reality that a high number of applications are never reviewed by programs' admissions committees, as a result of not meeting requirements related to undergraduate degrees or minimum GPA in the initial screening processes. Programs have the capacity to approach admissions processes in a variety of ways, by reviewing all applications, by only reviewing those who pass an initial screening, or by only reviewing those who meet particular criteria. In most graduate program admissions processes, quantitative criteria are considered first, in screening (e.g., a determination of whether the candidate has met the minimum GPA requirement) and qualitative or contextual criteria are only considered later in the admission review process, which may include letters of recommendation or applicants' personal statements or letters of intent.

Some programs have applied additional equity-focused criteria to the admissions process, e.g., allowing applicants to make explicit their EDI views and values, or adding flexibility into the admissions process to acknowledge diverse pathways to graduate school. As an example, the TMU School of Social Work holds strict GPA requirements for admission and only admits students who hold a Bachelor of Social Work. The application process offers applicants an opportunity to complete a *Statement of Interest* with encouragement to address the EDIA values of the school and the noted anti-oppressive and anti-racist approaches that underpin the School's values. Rather than requiring students to simply outline their particular research interests and background, it asks applicants to shape their statement around their understanding of these key values. Furthermore, while applicants are asked to answer two main questions in their statement, there is also an optional third question available to students, focusing specifically on EDIA. Applicants to the program are afforded flexibility in choosing a question to address that may play to their experience or strengths, and are also given an opportunity to reflect upon EDIA, their values and the values of the program at this early stage in the process.

The TMU MA program in Child and Youth Care has specific prerequisite academic requirements that include a minimum GPA requirement and a set number of hours of direct work experience in child and youth serving settings, the application information page also stipulates that admissions committees may recognize applicants' work experience that has involved equity, diversity, and inclusion even if experienced outside of traditional paid/professional contexts. This may allow for consideration of a more diverse pool of applicants who have varied work experiences prior to applying to the program. This requirement serves to recognize, as the [program's website](#) states, that "many activities in particularly marginalized contexts do not unfold in professional or institutionalized settings but are nevertheless of enormous value to the field of child and youth care" (School of Child and Youth Care, 2022). While the program does indicate that applicants must meet the minimum GPA requirement, they state an aim to try to ensure opportunities for individuals who have met academic requirements but may have unique or "non-traditional" involvement with children and youth facing adversity, including opportunities

for these potential applicants to expand upon their eligibility through an in-person or phone interview.

Launched in fall 2020, the Lincoln Alexander School of Law at TMU outlines a holistic admissions process that seeks to expand a pool of diverse applicants, a goal that is predicated on unique admissions strategies focusing on more expansive evaluative criteria. Meeting this goal also involves EDIA recruitment initiatives that precede application, including cultivating contact with secondary-schools and undergraduate students in order to encourage them to consider applying for law school. The Law School seeks to offer a transparent admissions process with criteria that is made publicly accessible to all applicants. While admission is based on the applicant's GPA, LSAT score and personal statement, the admissions committee is also committed to evaluating a holistic view of the student, assessing their unique path to law school, their past and future contributions in their communities, and while considering how each potential student might represent a diversity of social, cultural and political interests in the field of law.

While the GPA, test scores and personal statement are required documents, admissions is also guided by key criteria which include: work experience; volunteer experience, especially where relevant to social justice and cultural participation; personal accomplishments; career goals, and, importantly, any personal context or events that the applicant wishes to bring to the attention of admissions committee that might include ways in which the candidate has faced and/or overcome systemic challenges and barriers. For applicants, a subsequent online interview and personal statement will be centered around EDI principles and offer applicants the opportunity to expand upon personal experiences and the impact of these experiences on their pursuit of their legal education and career.

IX. Recommendations and next steps

The following recommendations arise from the literature review, internal and external scans, and our discussions and consultations regarding opportunities for increasing access to graduate education and support initiatives for graduate students from underrepresented groups through their journey as a graduate student. These include providing dedicated support and resources for students from equity-deserving groups in the pre-admission and admission process, exploring a more holistic approach to admissions, offering tailored support and mentorship for students after enrolment, and establishing institutional changes in YSGS and across the university as a whole.

The following six recommendations are presented as directions for next steps:

- ❖ **Consider adopting a more holistic approach to admissions review for graduate programs.**
- ❖ **Provide dedicated support and resources throughout the admissions process.**
- ❖ **Offer tailored support throughout the graduate school experience.**
- ❖ **Enhance mentorship opportunities tailored to support students from equity-deserving groups.**
- ❖ **Advocate and actively engage in the establishment of an institutional EDIA strategy or framework to support and sustain equity-focused initiatives, across the university and graduate programs.**

Further description and detail on each recommendation, is provided below.

1. Consider adopting a more holistic approach to admissions review for graduate programs.

- Education, professional development and support need to be provided for faculty and staff involved in the admissions processes, on holistic admissions review. One suggestion to start may be an educational retreat or workshops focused on holistic admissions practices, involving Associate Deans (ADs) and Graduate Program Directors (GPDs), to begin discussions on what a holistic approach to admissions might look like, across the university, and in their own programs.
- While the implementation of a more holistic admissions review may look very different in different programs, it may be reasonable to aim to find agreement on the *guiding principles* that underpin a more holistic approach to admissions across programs. This could begin with focused discussions with graduate ADs and GPDs across programs.
- Programs should begin discussions on what a more holistic approach might look like from their perspective, given their current admission criteria, in the context of their EDIA goals and priorities.
- It is imperative to advocate for the provision of ongoing education, professional development, and updated relevant data for faculty and staff involved in a holistic approach to admissions, including data on applicant and student demographics, as well as data linking admission criteria to indicators of success (e.g., retention, time to graduation).

2. Provide dedicated support and resources throughout the admissions process.

- Examine and revise recruitment and admissions processes, adding in targeted outreach and the possibility of more relational, high-touch approaches, wherever possible.
- Consider the adoption of additional innovative, inclusive and high-touch methods in recruitment and as a way to support applicants as they navigate the application process,

such as providing opportunities for current graduate students to act as peer advisors/ambassadors in outreach, application and intake/first year processes. See, for example, the [iDiversity Ambassador](#) program (U of Washington) and the [Community of Support](#) program (University of Toronto MD program).

- Ensure recruitment events and initiatives are offered in a variety of formats, both in-person and virtual, with accommodations available and in a variety of settings, including events targeted at current undergraduate students, and those in community-based settings.
- Ensure that admissions forms, wherever possible, are available in more than one format and that forms and communications are accessible (e.g., making sure required forms are accessible to screen readers).
- Offer the possibility of high-touch personalized guidance throughout the admissions processes, including where reasonable, individualized advice and responses to applicant queries.
- Create collaborative relationships with community groups for secondary students from equity-deserving groups, and with, for example, post-secondary counsellors across Ontario bands and nations, introducing the idea of graduate studies as early as possible.
- Continue to ensure strong relationships between undergraduate and graduate programs, including exploring purposeful pathways.
- Examine how recruitment and application materials and instructions are provided, to explore providing them in a variety of traditional formats, and mediums (e.g., short instructional videos, FAQs, one-on-one advising opportunities).
- Ensure that YSGS and graduate programs review their websites, and outreach/recruitment materials, to reflect diverse and inclusive images, and wording and to ensure that tailored programs to support applicants or students from equity-deserving groups are highlighted.
- Ensure that the YSGS website includes a dedicated section to university-wide and graduate studies' equity-focused initiatives, activities and programs at TMU.
- Provide more detail on the YSGS and program websites, making potential applicants and newly admitted students who require accommodation aware of available supports ahead of time, and facilitate early connections with Academic Accommodations Support services.

3. Provide tailored support throughout the graduate school experience.

- Ensure that when we are discussing tailored support of students from equity-deserving groups, we are considering all aspects of holistic support, including academic, non-academic, and financial support.
- Explore the enhanced provision of academic and non-academic support tailored to students from equity-deserving groups.
- Integrate support recommendations from institutional guidance documents such as those from groups including the TMU Anti-Black Racism Task Force, the TMU Aboriginal Student Services, as well as external reports, including the Government of Ontario Postsecondary Education Standards Development Committee proposed recommendations for supporting students with disabilities (2022).

- Continue to provide targeted funding opportunities for graduate students from equity-deserving groups, on admission and throughout the graduate studies journey.
- Explore the possibilities of providing funding based not only on criteria of financial need but also on merit, and on inspirational and achievement bases that allow students to articulate their scholarly accomplishments and goals, rather than outline financial stressors and in some cases, challenging life experiences and circumstances.
- Develop a set of guidance materials and instructions to provide more explicit and clear guidance and advice for graduate students in applying for and being nominated for internal and external funding, including guidance on collecting nominations, reference letters and non-academic references as well as clarity on eligibility requirements;
- Offer individualized guidance on applying for funding opportunities.
- Work to improve the clarity of eligibility requirements and scoring rubrics available to adjudicators, as well as working to ensure diversity on adjudication panels.
- Continue to highlight the accomplishments, research and narratives from faculty, staff and graduate students from equity-deserving groups on the YSGS website, and in communications such as GRADNews and PostdocNews.
- Engage in monitoring of websites and timely website updates and additions, including easier navigation of funding opportunities based on eligibility and highlighting the accomplishments, opportunities and supports for graduate students from underrepresented groups.
- Work closely with the Academic Accommodations Support unit to ensure that graduate students with disabilities/disabled students have the full range of supports for their success, in both courses and non-course degree requirements.
- Continue to collaborate with other units (e.g., Student Life and Learning Support, Aboriginal Student Services, the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching) to consider enhancing current offerings aimed at providing academic support programs geared specifically at graduate students from underrepresented and equity-deserving groups, in an attempt to not only provide focused support, but to help graduate students build peer networks and communities of support.

4. Enhance mentorship opportunities tailored to support students from equity-deserving groups.

- Continue active collaboration with the Tri-Mentoring Program to promote mentorship opportunities for students from underrepresented groups, as both mentors and mentees.
- Consider the development of mentorship programs for undergraduate students from equity-deserving groups to have mentorship from upper level graduate students and faculty, to support them in considering the possibility of pursuing graduate studies and in the application process.
- Work to ensure that mentors are recognized for their time and significant contributions, through provision of professional development opportunities, and wherever possible, financial remuneration.
- Support the recruitment and hiring of diverse faculty/YSGS members, and provide ongoing professional development for senior graduate students and faculty members who are interested in inclusive leadership and mentoring.

5. Create a welcoming and purposefully inclusive university graduate student community.

- Ensure YSGS and individual programs engage in purposeful and consultative work to ensure that all spaces at the university are welcoming and inclusive, both in-person and on-campus spaces as well as online spaces and websites.
- Ensuring that information is provided in a variety of accessible formats on websites, that contact information for individual follow-up and questions are provided wherever possible, and ensuring that images are diverse and inclusive are all important in creating a welcoming online presence.
- Creating an EDIA-focused website that reflects and outlines the YSGS commitments to EDIA, including resources available to students and equity-focused initiatives.
- Explore and establish EDIA-focused academic courses, curricula and programming that can capture the interests and needs of graduate students from equity-deserving groups.
- Development of equity-based competency series for graduate students to improve their understanding of inclusion and prepare them to create more inclusive spaces in their research, scholarship and careers.

6. Advocate and actively engage in the establishment of an institutional EDIA strategy or framework to support and sustain equity-focused initiatives, across the university, and work towards establishing equity-focused strategic priorities across graduate programs, and within YSGS.

The importance of an institution-wide EDIA commitment and strategy to guide, support and sustain equity-focused activities and initiatives at the Faculty and program levels, cannot be overstated. The recommendations herein can be more effectively initiated, measured and evaluated when introduced as an integral part of a broader, institutional strategic approach to reduce barriers for applicants and students from underrepresented groups. Positioning equity-focused initiatives, like holistic admissions review, into the “core institutional mission” (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, p. 2) and strategy can facilitate allocation of resources and more sustainable support.

Individual graduate programs can also be encouraged to develop an EDIA strategy unique to their programs, that would include examination and possible revision of admission criteria, in the context of a broader equity-focused approach. It is clear that program, Faculty and institutional equity-focused strategic plans would be arguably helpful to guide the implementation of many of the recommendations in this report.

From a YSGS perspective, one strong recommendation is to establish a *YSGS Vice-Provost and Dean’s EDI Advisory Committee* to guide, support and sustain equity-focused activities and initiatives at the Faculty and program level, and with a particular focus on the admission, retention, experience and engagement of graduate students from equity-deserving groups. Such an advisory committee could provide consultation and guidance on proposed strategic priorities, as well as help ensure an equity focus across all YSGS-led activities, programs and initiatives.

Conclusion

A primary goal and objective of this report is to provide the university and YSGS administration, Faculties, and graduate programs an overview of what tangible, realistic and achievable progress can be made so the institution can become more accessible, equitable, diverse, accessible and inclusive to students from equity-deserving groups to pursue, thrive and flourish as graduate students.

As members of the YSGS Dimensions Team, it is our hope that this report is useful in supporting your Faculties and departments in creating graduate programs, pathways and supports that meet the equity, diversity, inclusion and access needs of our current and future graduate students.

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Sukhai, M. (2016). Graduate students with disabilities: Myths, misperceptions and resources. Presentation at the National Taskforce on the Experience of Graduate Students with Disabilities. Available [here](#).

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Thompson, N.L., & Campbell, A.G. (2013). Addressing the Challenge of Diversity in the Graduate Ranks: Good Practices Yield Good Outcomes. *CBE Life Sciences Education*. 12(1), pp. 19-29.

Universities Canada (2019). Recent data on equity, diversity and inclusion at Canadian universities. Accessible [here](#).

U.S. Department of Education (2016). Advancing diversity and inclusion in higher education. Key data highlights focusing on race and ethnicity and promising practices. Accessible [here](#).

Wilson, M.A., Oden, M.A., Walters, T., LePass, A.L., & Bean, A.J. (2019). A model for holistic review in graduate admissions that decouples the GRE from race, ethnicity and gender. *CBE – Life Sciences Edition*, 18: ar7. Accessible [here](#).

Appendix 1: Definitions

Accommodations

as defined in TMU Policy 159: Academic Accommodations of Students with Disabilities planned variation in the way a student with a disability receives course curriculum and materials, participates in course activities or demonstrates mastery of course content and skills through evaluation and assessment. (TMU is committed to providing academic accommodation so long as it does not impose undue hardship).

Consideration

as defined in TMU Policy 167: Academic Considerations

alternate arrangements that may be made in response to students with extenuating circumstances.

Disability

as defined in the Ontario Human Rights Code

(a) any degree of physical disability, infirmity, malformation or disfigurement that is caused by bodily injury, birth defect or illness and, without limiting the generality of the foregoing, includes diabetes mellitus, epilepsy, a brain injury, any degree of paralysis, amputation, lack of physical coordination, blindness or visual impediment, deafness or hearing impediment, muteness or speech impediment, or physical reliance on a guide dog or other animal or on a wheelchair or other remedial appliance or device,

(b) a condition of mental impairment or a developmental disability,

(c) a learning disability, or a dysfunction in one or more of the processes involved in understanding or using symbols or spoken language,

(d) a mental disorder, or

(e) an injury or disability for which benefits were claimed or received under the insurance plan established under the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act, 1997; (“handicap”)

Extenuating circumstances

as defined in TRU Policy 167: Academic Considerations

occurrences of reasonable significance that:

(a) are outside of students’ immediate control;

(b) could not have been reasonably foreseen or avoided; and

(c) significantly affect the students’ ability to fulfill their academic requirements.

Appendix 2: Additional resources and further reading

EDI in a postsecondary Canadian context

Universities Canada (2019). Equity, diversity and inclusion at Canadian universities. Report on the 2019 national survey. Accessible [here](#).

Universities Canada (2017). Inclusive excellence principles. Accessible [here](#).

EDI and Graduate Studies

Simon Fraser University (2022). Resources for anti-racism work in graduate and postdoctoral studies. Accessible [here](#). This is a collection of books, chapters and articles as well as video, podcasts and radio links.

Council of Graduate Studies (2021). Social justice and anti-racism resources for graduate education. Accessible [here](#). This is an extensive collection of tools and resources (including articles, reports, website and social media) for deans, faculty, staff and students including resources on holistic admissions, culturally aware mentoring and includes disciplinary-specific examples and general resources.

For an in-depth exploration into graduate admissions from a systems perspective, the following book is an interesting read: Posselt, J. (2016). *Inside graduate admissions: Merit, diversity and faculty gatekeeping*. Harvard University Press: USA. Link to publisher's website [here](#).

Accessible Education

Council of Ontario Universities (2010). Introduction to accessible education. Accessible [here](#).

https://heqco.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Formatted_Accessibility_FINAL.pdf

Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (2020). Improving the accessibility of remote higher education: Lessons from the pandemic and recommendations. Accessible [here](#).

Accommodations for students with disabilities/disabled students

Postsecondary Education Standards Development Committee, Government of Ontario. Development of proposed postsecondary education standards – final recommendations report 2022. Accessible [here](#).

Rose, M. & Council of Ontario Universities (2010). Accommodating students with disabilities. Accessible [here](#).

National Educational Association of Disabled Students Graduate Task Force (2016). Understanding Accessibility in Graduate Education for Students with Disabilities in Canada. Accessible [here](#).

Ontario Human Rights Commission (2018). Policy on accessible education for students with disabilities. Accessible [here](#).

Council of Ontario Universities (2017). Accessible Campus. Visit the website [here](#).

Admissions, access and EDI

Merner, P. & Beatty-Guenter, P. (2018). Admissions policies and practices for underrepresented students. A report prepared for the British Columbia Centre for Admissions and Transfers. Accessible [here](#).

Doran, J., Ferguson, A. K., Khan, G. A., Ryu, G., Naimool, D., Hanson, M. D., & Childs, R. A. (2015). *What are Ontario's Universities Doing to Improve Access for Under-represented Groups?* Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario. Accessible [here](#).

U.S. Department of Education (2016). Advancing diversity and inclusion in higher education. Key data highlights focusing on race and ethnicity and promising practices. Accessible [here](#).

Graduate School EDI Strategies

The Graduate School Office of Equity, Inclusion and Diversity, University of Washington (2020). 2020 Equity, Inclusion and Diversity Plan for the Graduate School. Accessible [here](#).

Toward inclusive education at TMU. 2019 Student Self-ID Diversity report. Accessible [here](#).

Career resources for students from equity-deserving groups

University of Toronto (2020). Your journey: A career guide for trans and non binary students. Accessible [here](#). Created by university staff from the Career Exploration and Education department and the Sexual and Gender Diversity Office, this resources offers advice, strategies and insight to support trans and non-binary students as they explore career possibilities, and move into the workplace and their careers.

St. John's University (2022). Identity-based career resources. Accessible [here](#). This is a curated list of career supports and resources for BIPOC students, for students with disabilities, for students in the 2SLGBTQIA+ communities, for students who were formerly incarcerated, or who are undocumented.

University of Washington (2022). Diversity Resources: Funding and Scholarships. Accessible [here](#). This resource includes a list of funding opportunities in the U.S. and Canada for students with disabilities, students who are homeless or formerly homeless, for those from the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, and for students from underrepresented races and ethnicities.

National Association of Foreign Student Advisers (NAFSA: Association of International Educators (2021). Supporting 2SLGBTQIA+ International Students. Accessible [here](#).

Holistic Admissions

Kent, J. (2016). Understanding holistic review in higher education admissions. College Board/Education Council. Accessible [here](#).

The Graduate School, University of Washington (2022). Holistic Admissions. Accessible [here](#). This resource includes two resource documents: a summary of promising practices in holistic admissions and considerations for effective implementation of holistic admissions reviews.

American Association of Medical Colleges (2022). Holistic Review. Accessible [here](#). This web resource includes a series of tools for admissions departments to apply as they integrate holistic review.