

https://www.hilltimes.com/2021/01/04/open-letter/277214?fbclid=IwAR3gdC6iKoqnwQuII2hAHVgD9qv8LhTOD3TlqPZNHsndteRueVuE7jE5_WE

At Canada's universities, institutional racism more than a case of a few bad apples

By ALKA KUMAR, MOJGAN RAHBARI-JAWOKO, SARA ASALYA JANUARY 4, 2021

Without comprehensive race-based data, equity policies within Canadian universities have limited impact in adequately addressing discrimination and racism.



As Canadian universities do not collect race-based data, '63 out of the 76 universities across the country are unable to provide a breakdown of their student populations due to absence of data collection,' despite having diversity offices. *Photograph courtesy of Unsplash*

-
-
-
-
-
-

[The open letter from the Ontario Human Rights Commission](#) (OHRC), dated Dec. 18, 2020, castigating Ontario academic and educational institutions for failing to meet the needs of Black, Indigenous, and racialized students in these challenging times, is certainly bold and timely. The position of public censure OHRC has taken on through this statement speaks to our unusual times, and also to the high levels of systemic disarray our educational systems have fallen into.

The COVID pandemic has pushed us all abruptly into virtual spaces, has resulted in what has been coined as “COVID stress” — causing social isolation, adversely affecting our mental well-being, and exposing pre-existing fault lines rooted in systemic racism and pre-existing discrimination. As [recent data has affirmed](#), the pandemic has exacerbated simmering inequities in multiple sectors, [pushing marginalized and racialized communities further into precarity](#). This is especially true for Black, Indigenous, and racialized post-secondary students, who should have the necessary support as they navigate and face institutional and structural barriers and racism. The absence of such support has potential to negatively impact their identity construction, academic success, and sense of belonging, as well as ability to equally and fully participate in all aspects of the Canadian society.

Get The Weekend Point of View Newsletter

Top Canadian political and policy opinion and analysis. Saturdays and Sundays.

SIGN UP

By entering your email address you consent to receive email from The Hill Times containing news, analysis, updates and offers. [You may unsubscribe at any time](#). See our [privacy policy](#)

[The Newcomer Students' Association](#) has [issued a statement in response to the OHRC letter](#). In this statement, the group indicated it has “heard multiple accounts of students experiencing racism, discrimination, and xenophobia within Ontario post-secondary institutions.”

The pandemic, however, is certainly not the first instance of the issue of institutional and systemic racism being problematized within Canada’s postsecondary institutions.

For instance, a policy brief by Aisha Shibli from the Canadian Arab Institute in 2019 titled, “[Dismantling Systemic Racism in Canadian Post-Secondary Institutions: Arab Students’ Experiences on Campus](#),” indicated that racism and discrimination are inherently embedded within the culture of Canadian universities. Shibli notes that “63 out of the 76 universities across the country are unable to provide a breakdown of their student populations due to absence of data collection, despite having diversity offices.” This is a key factor as to why existing equity policies within Canadian universities tend to have an inadequate impact in effectively mitigating and dealing with existing institutional discrimination and racism. And it supports existing evidence suggesting that by and large Canadian universities are not essentially meeting their instituted legal obligations and general commitments guided by their anti-discrimination policies as well as the broader national institutional standards.

Olivia Bowden, in her CBC News article, “[Canadian University Students Use Instagram to Reveal Racism on Campuses](#),” draws attention to lived experiences of racialized students with racism noted in the media. She points out dozens of Instagram accounts created by students and alumni of colour in 2020 at various universities [Western University](#), [Queen’s University](#), [York University](#), [McGill University](#), [Concordia University](#), [Dalhousie University](#), the [University of Ottawa](#), and the [University of British Columbia](#) to name a few, as well as in various high schools across Canada to share stories of racism and abuse. These accounts are providing an outlet for students and are aimed at holding their respective institutions accountable, calling for immediate action by the schools.

Moreover, the existing systemic racism poses a barrier to hiring, advancement, retention, and full inclusion of racialized students, as well as employees within postsecondary institutions. [A 2019 report by Universities Canada](#) shows that, while the percentage of women in senior leadership positions is now almost proportionate to that of men, racialized people represent only eight percent of senior leaders and 21 percent of full-time faculty. Representation matters, for many reasons. For example,

as the popular adage goes, “if you can see it, you can be it,” to other robust arguments that real inclusion and diversity are essential at all levels of an organization, as that can mean huge and paradigmatic changes in thinking, leadership, and structures.

As we devise a post-pandemic recovery plan, we need to move beyond just “talk” and into actionable and meaningful change that focuses on implementation—for instance, creating safe spaces for full engagement, designing robust reporting and case management procedures, and moving from performative equity, diversity, and inclusion policies to ensuring effective support and mentorship processes. Certainly, further evidence is needed when it comes to creating optimal strategies for success and resilience of racialized students within post-secondary education, to assist faculty and staff to improve their pedagogy, and support resources and programs. We’re in dire need for transparency and accountability in policies related to employment equity and inclusive hiring.

Alka Kumar is the manager of research and policy at the Newcomer Students’ Association. Mojgan Rahbari-Jawoko is an instructor at Ryerson University. Sara Asalya is the executive director of Newcomer Students’ Association.

Correction: An earlier version of this piece did not properly attribute the source of a paragraph. It has since updated.

The Hill Times