



VANCOUVER ISLAND
UNIVERSITY

**Creating an
Equitable & Inclusive
Institution**

DISCUSSION PAPER

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Discussion Paper

Creating an Equitable and Inclusive Institution

Introduction

Our transition to a regional university provides us with a unique opportunity to determine our strengths as an institution and to identify significant paths for institutional development and growth. Vancouver Island University has been recognized for excellence in many areas, including our commitment to human rights, equity and inclusiveness.

This paper has been prepared to inform an institutional discussion on educational and employment equity. It explores the importance of educational and employment equity, the history of such initiatives at Vancouver Island University, and provides a brief analysis of our current situation. It has been written by Maria Gomes, Human Rights Advisor, in close consultation with the Human Rights Advisory Committee. This Committee has representation from administration, the three employee unions – CUPE, BCGEU and MFA – as well as the Vancouver Island University Students’ Union. It is our hope that this discussion paper will assist the institution in making decisions regarding future initiatives in the areas of educational and employment equity.

Why is being an equitable and inclusive institution important?

At the most fundamental level, creating an equitable and inclusive institution is about creating a more just society. It is about making the principles, set out in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, a lived reality. Canada is a multicultural and multi-racial country which espouses to be a nation where all citizens and residents are treated equitably. This sense of Canada, which initially included only linguist and ethnic minorities, has been expanded to include other equity-seeking groups, such as Canadians of Aboriginal ancestry, members of visible minorities, people with disabilities, and gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered Canadians.

Post-secondary education is a key tool that marginalized people can use to improve their economic and social conditions. Creating an institution that provides equal access to students from these communities, and actively supports their success through to graduation, would be an important contribution to creating an equitable society.

The importance of providing barrier-free education to members of marginalized groups is increasing with the growing diversity in the Canadian population. Canadians of Aboriginal ancestry are now listed in the “Top Ten Ethnic Origins” by Statistics Canada¹, representing a 19.8% population increase since the 1996 census. It is projected that by

¹ Top 10 Ethnic Origins, 2001 and 1996, Statistics Canada, Ethnocultural Portrait of Canada: Highlight Tables, 2001 Census

2017 Canadians of Aboriginal ancestry could account for 4.1% of Canada's population. The median age of Aboriginal Canadians is younger than the Canadian median and the fertility rate is higher. These factors will ensure that the need for Aboriginal learners to access and successfully participate in post-secondary education will be increasing.

Shifts in immigration have meant that the main source of immigrants coming to Canada is from Asia, with China, India and the Philippines topping the list of countries of birth for immigrants in 2001.² People who describe themselves as being a member of a visible minority in the census have increased to 13.4% of the Canadian population, a 25% increase since 1996.³ A second important change is that, due to changing immigration policies, many new immigrants to Canada come with post-secondary education and have similar aspirations for their children.

The exclusion of people with disabilities from post-secondary institutions used to be the norm. Despite an increase in post-secondary participation by people with disabilities, they are still under-represented in our institutions.⁴ Representing 12% of the Canadian population, people with disabilities are another diverse group whose goals and aspirations can be supported by access to post-secondary education.

In the last thirty years people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered have fought for and gained equality rights in Canada. As a fairly new equity seeking group there is very little data regarding their post-secondary participation rates. There is an increasing call for post-secondary institutions to be welcoming and inclusive of people who are members of sexual minorities.⁵

While women, one of the first equity-seeking groups to access post-secondary education, now participate in post-secondary education at a higher rate than men, their participation is still predominantly in gender-stereotyped fields of study.⁶ While some aspects of the education gap have been bridged, the wage gap has not. Wages for occupations

² Top 10 Countries of Birth for Immigrants, Canada, 2001, Statistics Canada, Ethnocultural Portrait of Canada: Highlight Tables, 2001 Census

³ Proportion of Visible Minorities, 1981 to 2001, Statistics Canada, Ethnocultural Portrait of Canada: Highlight Tables, 2001 Census

⁴ Post-Secondary Access and Student Financial Aid in Canada: Current Knowledge and Research Gaps, Looker, E. Dianne, Acadia University and Lowe, Graham S., Canadian Policy Research Networks and University of Alberta.

⁵ Many universities in Canada and the U.S. have responded to this growing demand by offering specialized support services for GLBT students and campaigns similar to our Positive Space campaign.

⁶ Post-Secondary Access and Student Financial Aid in Canada: Current Knowledge and Research Gaps, Looker, E. Dianne, Acadia University and Lowe, Graham S., Canadian Policy Research Networks and University of Alberta.

dominated by women have stagnated, while wages for occupations dominated by men have increased.⁷

The final group we wish to mention are low-income Canadians. Research has demonstrated that young people from low-income families have a lower participation rate than their higher income peers. Participation is also closely linked to the educational level achieved by parents. Since it is projected that, by 2017, 70% of job opportunities will require some post-secondary education⁸ access to post-secondary studies becomes a key ingredient in ending the cycle of poverty.

As we know, these groups are not accessing post-secondary education at appropriate levels, but what are the barriers? The barriers are different for each group and we will not be able to engage in that analysis in this paper. We do wish to provide a few examples:

- Our physical buildings and our methods and materials for learning are not universally accessible.
- Aboriginal learners enter an institution where their culture, history, and traditional knowledge are rarely present or recognized (unless they are enrolled in First Nations Studies). Lee Maracle, writer and academic, when asked to speak on ways post-secondary institutions can better support Aboriginal learners, said that she would not support Aboriginal learners entering our institutions as long as our goal was to teach them our knowledge. The relationship, she suggested, needed to be one of mutual respect and mutual learning, where Aboriginal knowledge, culture and traditions were as integral to the teachings of the institution as the western European traditions. There needs to be a meeting of equals, where both parties learn from the exchange.⁹
- Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered students are at increased risk of bullying, harassment, youth suicide and depression and often experience reduced family and community support.
- Research has shown that the high cost of post-secondary education and student debt are deterrents for students from lower income families.
- First generation post-secondary learners – whether immigrants, Aboriginal or low-income Canadians – often lack family support. Even when there is support, there are no family members to advise and teach the prospective student the ways of the academy – what institution to choose, what it is like, what are the essential survival skills - as well as the confidence that flows from knowing members of your family have traveled this road before.

⁷ Has Higher Education Among Young Women Substantially Reduced the Gender Gap in Employment and Earnings?, Frenette, Marc and Coloumbe, Simon, Analytical Studies Branch Research Paper, Number 301, 2007, Statistics Canada

⁸ Annual Service Plan, 2005/06, Ministry of Advanced Education, Province of British Columbia

⁹ Unpublished speech, 2007 Conference, Canadian Association for the Prevention of Discrimination & Harassment in Higher Education, Vancouver, Canada

Ensuring our own employee base is diverse and representative of the broader community assists with creating equity in a number of ways. First, having that diverse employee base will provide input to our decisions, programs and initiatives from perspectives that are currently missing. Employees who are disabled, of Aboriginal ancestry, or members of a visible minority can provide valuable insight into how our “normal” ways of doing things might not work for everyone. Secondly, it means that students would see themselves reflected in the institution and would have access to role models -- a key ingredient for perseverance in post-secondary studies and in achieving life goals. Finally, establishment of a diverse employee base redresses the imbalance created by the preferential hiring of white men and, later, white women, in the post-secondary system.¹⁰ Providing this equal opportunity ensures the diversity of people within the greater community is present in the institution to teach, support and mentor the next generation.

A common argument for making a commitment to having a diverse workforce is that, given the competition for qualified candidates, employers should expand their applicant pool by encouraging applications from people who are living with a disability, a member of a visible minority or of Aboriginal ancestry. We do not choose to make this argument as it suggests Aboriginal people, members of visible minorities and people with disabilities are a choice of last resort – where you go when you run out of white men and women to hire. Instead, as we have already pointed out, people who have been traditionally excluded have much to offer us in terms of expertise, skills and, most importantly, a different perspective to bring to problems, challenges and priority setting.

A final note is that a diverse institution enhances everyone’s learning. Lee C. Bollinger, President of Columbia University, made the case very effectively in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*:

“While the last century witnessed a new demand for specialized research, prizing the expert’s vertical mastery of a single field, the emerging global reality calls for new specialists who can synthesize a diversity of fields and draw quick connections among them. In reordering our sense of the earth’s interdependence, that global reality also cries out for a new age of exploration, with students displaying the daring, curiosity, and mettle to discover and learn entirely new areas of knowledge.

The experience of arriving on a campus to live and study with classmates from a diverse range of backgrounds is essential to students’ training for this new world, nurturing in them an instinct to reach out instead of clinging to the comforts of

¹⁰ The reader may be tempted at this point to question the suggestion that preferential hiring has occurred. While a thorough analysis is not possible in this paper it is an area that has been well researched. Here we will only quote Robert Birgeneau, currently Chancellor at Berkeley and former president of the University of Toronto and dean of science at MIT, “I believe that in no case was this discrimination conscious or deliberate. Indeed, it was usually totally unconscious and unknowing. Nevertheless, the effects were and are real. Some small steps have been taken to reverse the effects of decades of discrimination, but we still have a great deal more to accomplish before true equality and equal treatment will have been achieved.”

what seems natural and familiar. We know that connecting with people very – or even slightly – different from ourselves stimulates the imagination; and when we learn to see the world through a multiplicity of eyes, we only make ourselves more nimble in mastering - and integrating – the diverse fields of knowledge awaiting us.¹¹”

History of Commitment

Vancouver Island University made commitments to equity and inclusion through the approval of the Human Rights Policy and Employment Equity Policy. The Human Rights Policy, approved in 1991, approaches the goal of equality by prohibiting individual acts of discrimination, by establishing mechanisms for the education of employees and students regarding discrimination, and for addressing individual complaints of discrimination. The Human Rights Office was established to assist the institution in meeting the goals of this policy. This individualized approach helps redress individual acts of discrimination and helps create a fair and equitable environment for the individuals who are currently members of our campus community.

Judge Rosalee Abella, in her landmark 1984 Royal Commission on Equality in Employment, concluded that the individualized approach, while able to address individual instances of discriminatory treatment, is largely ineffective in addressing systemic discrimination.

“Systemic discrimination requires systemic remedies. Rather than approaching discrimination from the perspective of the single perpetrator and the single victim, the systemic approach acknowledges that by and large the systems and practices we customarily and often unwittingly adopt may have an unjustifiably negative effect on certain groups in society.”¹²

The Employment Equity Policy, approved in 1995, approaches the problem of discrimination at the systemic level being recommended by Judge Abella. Due to budgetary and human resource constraints this plan has not been implemented. At the time it was approved all of the employee unions were signatories to the plan and expectations were created that we would be taking steps to address systemic discrimination and exclusion.

More recently, a commitment to educational equity can be found in the Vancouver Island University Values Statement. In it we state that “first and foremost” we value our

¹¹ Why Diversity Matters, Bollinger, Lee C., The Chronicle of Higher Education, June 1, 2007, B20.

¹² Report of the Commission on Equality in Employment, Judge Rosalie Silberman Abella, Commissioner, October, 1984, Canadian Government Publishing Centre, page 9

students and we make a commitment to their educational and personal success. We also state that we value “students with different backgrounds, cultures, life experiences, and interests, and celebrate their diversity.” This commitment to student diversity asks us to take up the challenge of creating programs and services responsive to the needs these diverse learners bring.

Current Status

While progress has been made in achieving some of the goals and objectives outlined in the Employment Equity plan (improving campus safety, widespread dissemination of information regarding human rights, development of a code of ethics, individualized departmental initiatives to increase the diversity of faculty or students¹³) there has not been any focused institutional work in this area.

Since no formal employee audit has been conducted we do not know what our employee profile is. The following statements are impressionistic but nevertheless members of the university-college community would probably recognize their validity. Members of visible minority groups and people with disabilities are not employed at Vancouver Island University in the numbers you would expect if employment outcomes were equal.¹⁴ While many of us may know an employee who is a member of a sexual minority, it is unknown whether sexual orientation or gender identity are barriers to employment at our institution. Employees of Aboriginal ancestry are few in number and are largely employed in departments that serve students of Aboriginal ancestry (e.g. First Nations Student Services and First Nations Studies).¹⁵

The one group that appears to have equality of outcomes at Vancouver Island University may be white women. Compared to many universities we have impressive parity between women and men on faculty and in our employee groups as a whole. There are, however, some troubling aspects. The largest group of women is employed in support staff positions, the lowest paid employee group in the institution. While women and men are represented in almost equal numbers in teaching faculty, women and men continue to be predominant in their traditional fields (e.g. women in health and human service, men

¹³ Through anecdotal accounts from faculty it appears there have been attempts in specific departments to increase the diversity in their department and/or student body. These initiatives, as far as we are aware, have been informal and sporadic.

¹⁴ Since approximately 12% of Canadians have disabilities and another 12% of Canadians are members of visible minorities one could make the claim that they should be represented in these numbers in our workplace. However the analysis requires more complex and complete data, as it also depends on the availability of members of these groups who have the skills and education we require, our ability to attract them, etc. We do not propose to even attempt an analysis of what are numbers should be given our limited information and expertise in this area.

¹⁵ Recently the Director of Aboriginal Education identified 19 employees of Aboriginal ancestry employed at our institution. While students of Aboriginal ancestry are approximately 10% of our student population, employees of Aboriginal ancestry (using the figure of 19) are less than 2% of our employees.

in science and trades).¹⁶ Within administration, there are a large number of women on the lower end of the salary scale and, while numbers appear more balanced in middle management, we only now have our first woman at the executive level. It is clear that white women have made many inroads in employment at our institution and the distribution still largely reflects our society, with women being predominant in lower paid positions and in gender-stereotyped fields.

While there have been few formal initiatives directed at fostering educational equity, we have made inroads in providing access and support for students of Aboriginal ancestry and students with disabilities. We are recognized as a leader in First Nations education and have services and programs that support student access and learning. We have a wide variety of programs developed specifically for Aboriginal learners, planned and implemented to address their unique educational needs. In the most recent “Signpost” planning process, a recommendation was made to develop a recruitment strategy to attract more aboriginal faculty and staff. The establishment of the position of Director of Aboriginal Education and the development of plans to expand our offerings and services for Aboriginal learners, may mean that we will be able to better serve Aboriginal students throughout the institution.

At the Retreat for Aboriginal Education, attended by faculty, administrators, Elders, support staff, students and community members, the need was identified to incorporate

“...aboriginal ways of knowing and being into programs (respect for local cultures, use and teaching of indigenous language and utilizing elder knowledge, history, including traditional ecological knowledge as well as acknowledging a holistic approach to areas such as health and environmental studies). It was suggested that this inclusion would result in Aboriginal students lived history and experience being validated as well as creating opportunities for cross cultural sharing and learning for non-Aboriginal students.”¹⁷

Similar to the views quoted from Lee Maracle earlier in this paper, our local community is asking that we enhance our commitment to equality and to developing a partnership of equals, by valuing Aboriginal knowledge and teachings in our curriculum and teaching.

There are many challenges ahead. They include fostering employee awareness of the unique circumstances faced by Aboriginal students; providing learning environments that foster Aboriginal student success throughout the institution; developing an institutional culture that values Aboriginal people’s unique experiences, cultures and traditional

¹⁶ Even when the raw numbers look like great progress has been made it is important to look at the actual positions women are in compared to men. For example, according to a report provided by the Human Resource department the Faculty of Science and Technology is 36% female at Malaspina. This is impressive in a traditionally male dominated faculty. Once you dig a little deeper you find that 1/3 of these women in the faculty are employed as support staff or technicians.

¹⁷ Report on Retreat for Aboriginal Education, Vancouver Island University, Internal document prepared by Sharon Hobenshield, Director of Aboriginal Education.

knowledge; and, securing an institutional commitment and resources to this exciting undertaking. The strong base we already have in Aboriginal education may mean that this is a significant area for further development.

The Positive Space campaign is an institutional initiative that supports the increased participation of GLBT students and employees in the life of the institution. Other initiatives that have been undertaken at post-secondary institutions in Canada include specialized GLBT student services and organized GLBT student groups on campus.

Despite our challenging environment for students with mobility impairments, our population of students with disabilities has been steadily increasing. In 2006/07 there were 633 students with disabilities enrolled at Vancouver Island University - approximately 6% of our student population. If we are to provide access, support and effective learning environments for this growing group of students we will need to enhance resources, promote the development of universally accessible teaching approaches and materials and improve physical access on our campuses.

We have a significant number of visible minority students who appear to primarily be international students.¹⁸ As we do not collect this kind of information from our students we do not know whether we have a significant number of local visible minority students. While the Faculty of International Education provides support to international students, we have not focused on the needs of immigrants and visible minority Canadians who may be enrolled at our institution or whose social and economic status would benefit from access to post-secondary studies.

There is no data on the income level of our student's families, or the educational background of parents, but our guess is that a significant proportion of our students may be the first generation in their families to attend post-secondary education.¹⁹ How well these students are faring, what unmet needs they may have, and how we could better serve these first generation post-secondary learners are questions that, as far as we are aware, have not been considered.

¹⁸ This comment is impressionistic – based on visual scan of cafeteria and student language use.

¹⁹ The resource base of the Vancouver Island economy has meant that most towns have been largely working class, where most residents are employed in positions that have not required a post-secondary education. With the economy shifting to some extent away from resources these traditional demographics may be changing.

Dialogue on Investing in Equity and Inclusion

The challenge of creating an institution that offers access, appropriate learning environments and support for these diverse learners may appear daunting. It is not a goal that could be achieved in the short term, but rather one which would require careful prioritization and a sustained effort over many years. It would require outreach initiatives for these students, enabling them to consider attending post-secondary studies, and then it would continue with facilitation of their enrolment. It would require having a diverse faculty who understand the unique challenges, and who are ready to mentor and support these students. It also means we need to value what these students and diverse employees bring to the institution – their experience, culture, and insight.

The Human Rights Advisory Committee believes that institutional dialogue is needed around issues of equity and inclusion and the path our institution will take. We believe that commitments in this area should be grounded in shared values and a shared vision around equity and inclusion. A dialogue on the following questions may assist us to develop this shared vision:

- What are our institutional strengths and achievements around equity and inclusion? Is this a significant path for us as we move to becoming a Regional University?
- What is required of us if we are to meet the needs of diverse learners – students of Aboriginal ancestry, students with disabilities, students who are immigrants, students who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered, first generation learners and students who are visible minorities?
- To what extent do our current policies reflect a commitment to equity and inclusion – admission, recruitment, hiring, and many others?
- In what areas do we need more information? What barriers might challenge our development of educational and employment equity initiatives?
- If we wish to invest in equity and inclusion, what should our priorities be in this area? What areas are more/less important? What are the next steps we should take?

We believe that Vancouver Island University is at a turning point in its development as a post-secondary institution. With our current status as a regional university comes many questions about the kind of university we wish to be. It is important for these fundamental issues of diversity, equity and inclusion to be part of that dialogue.