

# CREATING A VIRTUAL EQUITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

TEHMINA KHWAJA *Camosun College*

AMANDA WAGER, MELISSA LYON *Vancouver Island University*

DENISE O'NEIL GREEN *University of Toronto*

**ABSTRACT.** Post-secondary institutions in Canada are trying to bring about policy and culture change to promote equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) on their campuses. Uniquely, smaller institutions face barriers due to lack of capacity and personnel. As such, the research presented in this note from the field recommends that forming virtual communities of practice to learn EDI best practices from similar institutions can aid in building capacity and addressing those barriers. However, for EDI communities of practice to be sustainable, the folks leading the community have to be in ongoing, empowered EDI positions rather than being precarious contract employees, as is often the case at smaller Canadian institutions.

## CRÉATION D'UNE COMMUNAUTÉ DE PRATIQUE VIRTUELLE SUR L'ÉQUITÉ, LA DIVERSITÉ ET L'INCLUSION

**RÉSUMÉ.** Les établissements d'enseignement postsecondaire au Canada veulent instaurer des changements politiques et culturels pour promouvoir l'équité, la diversité et l'inclusion (EDI). Les petites institutions font face à des obstacles uniques en raison du manque de ressources et de personnel. Les découvertes présentées dans ce relevé de recherches recommandent de former des communautés de pratique virtuelles pour apprendre les meilleures pratiques en matière d'EDI auprès d'institutions similaires, ce qui peut aider à surmonter ces obstacles. Pour que les communautés de pratique en matière d'EDI soient durables, les personnes qui dirigent la communauté doivent occuper des postes permanents et autonomes en matière d'EDI, plutôt que d'être des employés contractuels précaires, comme c'est souvent le cas dans les petites institutions canadiennes.

Canadian universities are furthering efforts to cultivate equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) on their campuses through university policy making. These efforts also respond to requirements by federal research funding agencies (Canada Research Chairs, 2018) and social movements to make the Canadian narrative of a multicultural society and nation a true reality. Small and medium-sized universities have unique contexts and challenges that require EDI policies and strategic plans be developed in alignment with their particular needs. Since many small institutions lack funding, personnel, and resources for effective EDI policy and culture change, it is beneficial to form a *community of practice* where members across various institutions work collaboratively to share and learn best practices from one another (Wenger, 1998). Such collaborations require effective relationship building that, for some, became more challenging due to the COVID-19 pandemic because of the inability to meet in person. This note from the field illustrates one institution's experience with its efforts to develop a virtual EDI community of practice across 14 universities with interwoven activities of virtual relationship building. We also discuss barriers and advantages of developing a virtual EDI community of practice and provide recommendations for successful implementation.

## RATIONALE

Despite Canada's multicultural image, systemic barriers for underrepresented groups remain in Canadian higher education (Abawi, 2018; Campbell, 2019; Fleras, 2014; Henry et al., 2017a; Joseph et al., 2020; Tamtik & Guenter, 2019; Universities Canada, 2019). These underrepresented groups include women and gender non-binary individuals; racialized persons, such as African / Black people; people with disabilities; 2SLGBTQI+ individuals; and Indigenous Canadians. Equity, diversity, and inclusion are considered to be important principles of academic excellence. Yet, the definitions of these terms remain contested (Tamtik & Guenter, 2019; Universities Canada, 2017). The Tri-Agency Institutional Programs Secretariat defines *equity* as "the removal of systemic barriers and biases, to enact the practice of inclusion so that all individuals have equal access to and can benefit from the programs;" *diversity* as "differences in race, colour, place of origin, religion, immigrant and newcomer status, ethnic origin, ability, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and age;" and *inclusion* as the understanding that "individuals must be and feel valued, respected and equally supported" (Canada Research Chairs, 2019, paras. 1–2).

The Government of Canada has leveraged research funding to encourage universities to support EDI. The government also requires that they

establish equity targets and develop EDI action plans to qualify for research funding allocations (Canada Research Chairs, 2018; Side & Robbins, 2007). Even though there is widespread acceptance that EDI principles need to be prioritized and integrated into university policy and planning (Henry et al., 2017a; Universities Canada, 2019), not all universities have EDI action plans. Challenges to EDI work range from resistance to change to symbolic gestures that do not lead to meaningful transformation (Ahmed, 2007, 2012; Gil et al., 2018; Smith, 2020; Tavares, 2021; Williams, 2013). As loosely coupled systems (Weick, 2000), academic organizations are not conducive to change initiatives, such as those interwoven in EDI work. Furthermore, neoliberal approaches underlying universities uphold supremacy of capitalism and Whiteness, and treat inequalities as an individual issue (Acker, 2012; Henry et al., 2017b; Joseph et al., 2020). This individualism permeates EDI work with diversity officers – the majority of whom are women and/or racialized persons (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013) – often working in silos and isolation (Green, 2018; Nixon, 2017). As learning organizations (Senge, 2000), universities can create communities of practice (Wenger, 1988) to break down these silos and support collaborative learning about EDI.

#### **DEVELOPMENT OF A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE**

The institution leading this initiative is a small university located in British Columbia that began developing its EDI action plan in 2019. To learn best practices in EDI action planning, a decision to collaborate with similarly placed universities across Canada was made. A federal knowledge mobilization grant was secured to hold an event with the stated goal to provide a space for the participating universities to congregate and develop a deeper understanding of research-based EDI best practices and launch an EDI community of practice.

#### **PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS**

The host university invited all 41 members of the Alliance of Canadian Comprehensive Research Universities (ACCRU), a network of small and medium-sized comprehensive universities from across Canada. ACCRU member universities range in size from small (700–5,000 annual full-time enrollment) to medium (5,000–15,000 annual full-time enrollment). Thirteen universities responded to the invitation and agreed to participate in the initiative.

## VIRTUAL EDI SYMPOSIUM

To initiate this collaboration, a two-day symposium was organized in March 2021 to provide a platform for sharing EDI research, including quantitative and qualitative data, and evidence-based EDI best practices to co-create institutional materials, plans, and policies aimed at bringing about meaningful and lasting cultural change in the participating institutions' home communities. The symposium was initially envisioned as an in-person launching event, but had to pivot online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Presentations were invited from participating universities with a focus on EDI best practices. There was intentionality around including speakers and an event management team comprised of members belonging to underrepresented groups to make the event and community as diverse and inclusive as possible (Barrows et al., 2021).

The symposium sessions ranged from a plenary session in webinar format to Zoom breakout rooms for communication training and collaborative learning. An interactive Padlet board provided a space for mapping participant locations, giving feedback to presenters, brainstorming ideas, providing suggestions, and offering expertise. A virtual space for continued collaboration in a community of practice was created with Microsoft Teams. All technology tools were free online resources (such as Canva and Padlet) or provided by the host university (such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams), allowing users to record and retain notes and interactions. About 74% attendance ( $N = 163$ ) by symposium registrants (219) was recorded, which is quite substantial for free virtual webinars.

## CHALLENGES TO ACTIVE AND CONTINUED PARTICIPATION

The virtual collaboration that began in the middle of the pandemic presented several challenges to relationship building and continued engagement. Firstly, all but one of the folks involved in leading the initiative were in precarious contract positions, with graduate students providing support. The lack of involvement by permanent employees who could continue the community negatively impacted its sustainability since all EDI employees were in contract positions and left the host university shortly before or after the community was launched.

Secondly, active engagement proved somewhat difficult to ensure. For example, limited active participation was observed in collaborative sessions of the virtual symposium. This is likely due to "Zoom fatigue" and added screen times, workloads, and scheduling difficulties for often overburdened and under-resourced EDI personnel at smaller universities during the pandemic. As well, even though two iterations of a pre-

symposium networking event were organized, multiple rounds of relationship building and involvement of institutional representatives in senior roles would have enhanced engagement. The pre-symposium event served as a quick introduction. However, since all participating universities were ACCRU members, the senior leadership at the host university had existing relationships that could have potentially been leveraged to enhance participation. Instead, the two academic leads (both new immigrants to Canada with little access to established networks) were responsible for all aspects – including marketing – of the symposium and community of practice with little institutional support. This gap in assistance points to the common challenge of under-resourced EDI personnel working with little administrative support at academic institutions (Leon, 2014; Nixon, 2017; Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013).

Thirdly, the sudden pivot to virtual spaces, particularly navigating new technology tools such as the Padlet board and Microsoft Teams, was not comfortable for some participants. Due to added burden on IT staff in the pandemic, tech support could not be provided for all participants.

Lastly, the post-event anonymous survey administered among 53 participants of invited collaborative / interactive sessions had a response rate of 37% ( $n = 20$ ). The low response rate is likely due to survey fatigue during the pandemic, and may also indicate limited interest or bandwidth for continued engagement by the participants who chose not to respond to the survey. However, those who did respond to the survey were enthusiastic about their participation and expressed interest in a continued community of practice.

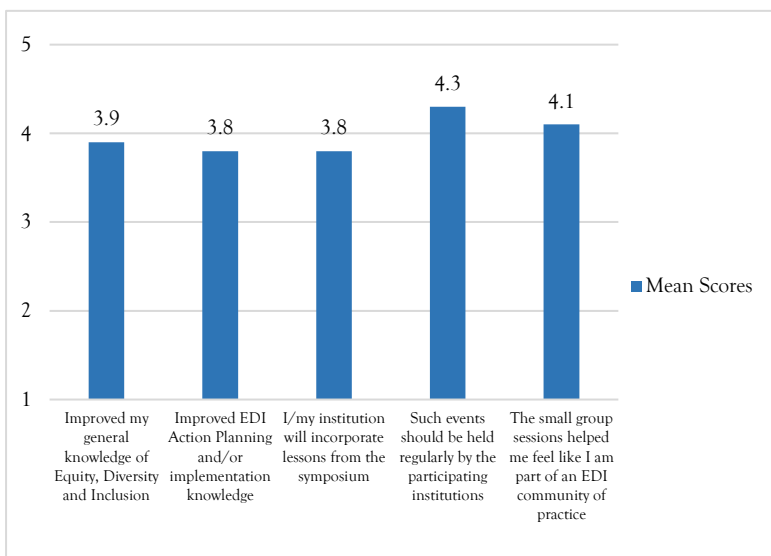
#### **ADVANTAGES OF VIRTUAL COLLABORATIONS**

Despite the challenges, the benefits of meeting in virtual collaborative spaces cannot be underestimated. Firstly, and most importantly, the virtual format for collaborations is highly inclusive as it allows easier accessibility for persons with disabilities and those with care responsibilities. For example, symposium participants with mobility disabilities did not need to travel or navigate potentially inaccessible spaces. Zoom live transcription facilitated the event for participants with impaired hearing. The availability of the recordings to registrants enabled them to access and share the content post event. Furthermore, a virtual event allowed for more remote participation by those who would not have been able to attend the event in person due to costs. For instance, the initial in-person event would have accommodated fewer than 50 guests (instead of the 219 who registered) due to space and accommodation

limitations. The grant funds could have paid for a few presenters, but for many participants, the travel and accommodation expenses would have been prohibitive. Hence, the virtual format has the potential to expand participation considerably, ensuring the inclusion of attendees with varying financial, family / care responsibilities, and abilities. The high rate of symposium attendance (74% of registrants attended some or all sessions, as noted earlier) speaks to the significance of the topic and ease of virtual participation which facilitated inclusion.

Secondly, the combination of large and small group activities in the virtual symposium enabled the participating universities to collaboratively share and learn evidence- and experience-based EDI best practices. Examples of effective best practices that worked for participants included cluster hiring of applicants from equity-deserving groups, creating dedicated positions for Indigenous researchers, incorporating EDI in the curriculum, outsourcing EDI training and surveys, decolonizing research by valuing Indigenous and community-based research, and proactive incorporation of Universal Design for Learning in pedagogy and systems, to name a few.

Thirdly, as evident from the Padlet board activity and the survey feedback (see Figure 1), virtually collaborating on EDI best practices with similarly placed institutions was a welcome experience for involved university representatives.



**FIGURE 1.** EDI symposium participation survey responses

Note. Likert scale range from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree (n = 20)

Most participants expressed a desire to continue the collaborations with more events and the community of practice. This sentiment is aptly reflected in the following comment by a survey participant in response to the prompt about their main takeaway from the virtual symposium:

That there is great disparity between where different universities are at in terms of their EDI planning, but also that they can learn from each other and be inspired in hearing what others do. Connection between universities and creating strong community of practice is key to not do the same mistakes and progress faster in EDI action plans and practices.

Finally, the virtual Microsoft Teams space continues to be available for collaboration as it allows access and inclusion for participants around the country, and potentially around the globe. The possibilities for virtual communities of practice are endless. Moreover, recommendations and lessons are provided to help inform practitioners who wish to successfully replicate, and indeed extend, our experience with creating a virtual EDI community of practice.

#### **LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This was the first experience of our team with creating virtual communities of practice. As such, we learned lessons that may help inform our future endeavours and those of others in academia. We highlight the main points below.

First, since the project leads (i.e., a research chair and postdoctoral fellow) were in academic (versus administrative) positions and did not lead the university's EDI initiatives, established relationships and required networking within the organization were lacking from the outset. Active participation in the event and the community of practice could have been improved if there were pre-existing and established relationships among permanent EDI employees in place before commencing the collaboration. This mismatch in roles provides evidence of Weick's (2000) loose coupling theory of leadership in academic organizations, which posits that systems are weakly associated in universities and often result in ambiguity in roles and outcomes.

Second, project leads were not provided any administrative support from the host university. Working with a small team of academics and students with little or no virtual event planning experience and little technical support, we had to divert our time and energy to administrative issues and learning technological tools at the expense of time spent on relationship building. We suggest that institutions seeking to lead EDI communities of practice provide this support to allow relationships to flourish.

Third, small institutions are required to fulfill federal expectations with limited capacity, and EDI work often falls to individual EDI personnel with little or no support. Forming communities of practice across institutions can help build capacity, ease some of the burden placed on EDI officers, and help institutions collaboratively learn evidence- and experience-based EDI best practices. Entering into formal or informal partnerships such as the one described here can also help collectivize EDI work rather than individualize it, which commonly results in overburdening the sole EDI officer at smaller institutions, and disrupt the neoliberal commodification of higher education. In terms of research, more studies are needed to highlight EDI communities of practice at and across universities because this perspective aligns well with aspirations to decolonize higher education by collectivizing knowledge and resources instead of competing for scarce funding and expertise.

Lastly, the building of virtual communities of practice across institutions comes with many challenges and is only truly sustainable when personnel in ongoing, empowered positions are involved and adequate technical and administrative support is provided. With most EDI staff at smaller institutions, including the host university in this instance, in precarious contract positions with little or no influence, this promising practice could not be implemented fully in our experience, even as its immediate benefits were obvious. A larger role and more support, both in terms of funding and networking, from senior administrators and faculty would aid in sustaining the community.

## CONCLUSION

EDI is increasingly considered essential to academic excellence, prompting grant funding agencies and institutions to bring EDI from the margins to the center of policy making and organizational culture. Collaborative learning opportunities are often not available for EDI administrators at smaller institutions. Yet such collaborations are especially relevant and important due to the evolving nature of EDI planning (Ahmed, 2012). Virtual EDI CoPs involving multiple universities can help break down silos in academia and allow smaller institutions to pool knowledge and experience to help each other grow. Virtual events and collaborations are also likely to become more prevalent in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic due to their greater inclusivity, and we hope our experience may help guide other institutions seeking to develop EDI collaborations across universities with similar challenges.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research was made possible by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Connection Grant.

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