Toward Inclusive Excellence:

Insights from BIPOC First-Generation Students on Institutional Support and Equity Practices in Canadian Higher Education

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Toward Inclusive Excellence: Insights from BIPOC First-Generation Students on Institutional Support and Equity Practices in Canadian Higher Education

Abstract

In Canadian higher education (HE), challenges persist for Indigenous and visible minority first-generation (BIPOC FG) students. This study explores the experiences of BIPOC FG students at Canadian research universities and examines how their interactions with the institution may shape understandings of purpose, quality, effectiveness, and areas for improvement in higher education support and services. This inquiry aligns with efforts to achieve meaningful and impactful Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) in Canadian higher education. The research aims to answer the following questions: 1) How do BIPOC first-generation students experience higher education within Canadian public research universities? and 2) How do BIPOC first-generation students experience institutional support in terms of its alignment with meaningful equity, diversity, and inclusion commitments? Fifteen BIPOC FG participants were recruited from multiple Canadian U15 public research universities at various stages of their education. The study utilizes virtually conducted semi-structured interviews. Amartya Sen's capability approach is employed to understand the nuances of individual experiences and achievements, particularly in relation to student agency, in the thematic analysis of the collected data. Emerging areas of interest, as indicated by student narratives, were organized into the following themes: (1) transitions to higher education, (2) navigating systemic challenges in higher education, (3) community building and social networks, (4) overcoming obstacles, and (5) aspirations for an equitable university. By understanding student experiences and perspectives, this inquiry aims to bridge gaps between marginalized students' realities, institutional student support, and EDI goals, informing future enhancements to policies and initiatives.

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ٱلۡحَمۡدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ

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List of abbreviations:

HE – higher education

EDI – Equity, Diversity, Inclusion (interchangeable with **DEI**)

BIPOC – Black, Indigenous, Person of Colour

FG – first-generation

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Ushered in by shifts in popular culture and the influence of civil rights and social justice movements, topics of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) have been pushed to the forefront of conversation concerning higher education (HE) administration and practices. In attempts to lead the foray of the 'progressive' university, there has been much discussion around building equitable practices for the benefit of marginalized students within the academic community (Ahmed, 2012). Though practices differ between institutions, there have been efforts in establishing programs, centers, and other resources, alongside generalized support services for students, with goals and intent codified in EDI policy documents. However, there remains significant space for improvement (MacKenzie et al., 2023; Tamtik & Guenter, 2019), as marginalized students continue to feel the compounding effects of disadvantage within the university. Higher education occupies an integral nexus in society, acting as a positional good which impacts socioeconomic mobility and outcomes for students who participate in it. As such, structural biases within the system continue to propagate inequity (Marginson, 2016b, 2018).

It is imperative for institutions to recognize the gaps that exist within its structure. Though universities may champion equity, the reality remains that many minoritized students continue to face disadvantages and obstacles which compound throughout their educational journey (Marginson, 2016b, 2018). The social contexts of minoritized individuals impact their performance and ability to successfully integrate into the university, as students must often cope with a lack of social and material resources. This may have repercussions on equitable environments and prevent minoritized students from achieving their personally defined measures of success (Unterhalter, 2009; Walker, 2015).

To best understand how to support students facing social barriers in their higher education experience, it is integral to center their voices and narratives. By understanding the experiences of minoritized individuals, a deeper understanding of the common needs and challenges faced by these students may be developed. In turn, this may inform EDI practices within the institution, leading to the development of better structures and initiatives which promote the ongoing success of all students.

With this understanding, I aim to investigate the following questions:

1. How do BIPOC first-generation students experience higher education within Canadian public research universities?
2. How do BIPOC first-generation students experience institutional support, in terms of its alignment with meaningful equity, diversity, and inclusion commitments?

Using these questions to guide inquiry, this research develops the context of Canadian higher education practice and inequity, informed by the experiences of Black, Indigenous, Person of Colour (BIPOC) first-generation (FG) students currently enrolled in Canadian higher education, within the U15 group of research-intensive universities. Their narratives are collected through semi-structured interviews, thematically analyzed and understood, with the aim of communicating common student experiences and suggesting room for growth within institutional practices. In Chapter 2, I discuss the research context and relevant literature. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology of the study. Chapter 4 details the findings and discussion developed from this study. In Chapter 5, I suggest areas for application and further development.

Chapter 2. Research Context

2.1 Introduction

To answer the research questions posed in this study, it is integral to provide a critical discussion of the context and existing research undertaken in this area. As such, this chapter will establish the overarching state of higher education in the Canadian national context, why the salience of institutional practice in student experience is integral for equitable education, relevant research, and the conceptual framework of the study.

2.2 Establishing context

2.2.1 Understanding higher education

Higher education (HE) occupies a critical niche in the functioning of society. The intrinsic purposes of HE, research and teaching to cultivate students' self-formation, have endured in its many iterations throughout history (Marginson, 2023). However, the extrinsic contributions—as they are produced conjointly with agents in adjacent social sectors—have evolved to accommodate perceptions and expectations associated with forces of neoliberal marketization in massified or High Participation Systems (HPS), resulting in emergent forms of stratification perpetuated within and through the system (Giroux, 2012; Marginson, 2016b; Marginson et al., 2023; Walker, 2015). The manifestations of inequity within HE structures are of particular concern to students, the primary stakeholder of the sector, and shape their higher education experiences and consequent life paths (Marshall, 2018a). The experiences of students are furthermore influenced by their counterpart internal stakeholders in the institution: faculty and administration, who play key roles in determining the practices, programs, and policies of the university, often with contribution from external stakeholders (Marshall, 2018a). Neoliberal HPS furthermore typically share commonalities in their institutional structures, such as undergraduate institutions that are structured to be marketed to mass audiences through modular courses and degree configurations, where students pick and choose classes, rather than engaging in their field of study within a fixed course schedule and set cohorts (Giroux, 2012; Marginson, 2016a; Trow, 1973). This institutional construction relegates undergraduate students further into the role of the consumer, where

courses are seen as a product or good to be obtained, and as such removes a sense of deep immersion in learning and isolates students from each other within the academic space (Côté & Allahar, 2011; Giroux, 2012; Marginson, 2018; Molesworth et al., 2009). The modern university has thus cultivated an environment which is dominated by neoliberal individualist conceptualizations, within which marginalized students are forced to operate.

University education acts as a positional good, meaning that the qualification of a university degree allows students who attain it to access economic and social opportunities they would otherwise not have, thereby impacting broader societal stratification and the distribution of resources and status. This may pertain to academic and career-related opportunities or the building of social networks and cultural knowledge, which in turn mediate access to wealth and social positioning. By entering and consequently succeeding within higher education, individuals may do so with the expectation of gaining upward socio-economic mobility (Marginson, 2018; Marshall, 2018b; Stevens et al., 2008). This expectation is one that is often both explicitly and implicitly communicated in the importance and need for pursuing higher education, as university is increasingly marketed as the attainment of a degree for career advancement, rather than an educational endeavour (Côté & Allahar, 2011; Giroux, 2012; Marshall, 2018a; Molesworth et al., 2009).

Neoliberal marketization has proliferated within the higher education sector. High participation systems, such as Canadian higher education, produce more skilled graduates than can be absorbed within the labour market. As such, stratification within higher education grows. The positional good designation of the university qualification gains or degrades in value based on socially and politically determined distinguishers, resulting in differentiation amongst graduates. Since all credentials do not act equally as social determinants of mobility and socioeconomic status, it is not enough to increase enrollment of students in post-secondary or higher education. The perpetuation of stratification and hierarchy through higher education illustrates how high participation and access to education alone is not enough to sustain equity within the field. As a result of marketized stratification, inequality is replicated in and through the system, rather than acting as an equalizer where all graduates emerge on equal footing (Davies & Zarifa, 2012; Giroux, 2012; Marginson, 2018; Marshall, 2018b; Stevens et al., 2008; Walker, 2015).

2.2.2 The landscape of Canadian higher education

Canadian higher education is not exempt from systemic stratification. Broadly speaking, it is a system which is difficult to centrally define, as there is no national HE infrastructure beyond federal research and scholarship funding schemes. Instead, all education in Canada is legislated at the provincial level, which leads to minor discrepancies between the co-existing systems—including differences in institutional autonomy, funding subsidization and research capacity, tuition structures and vocational schema, and embedded regional social inequality—contributing to variation in provincial agendas and operations (Breau, 2015; Usher & Balfour, 2023; Walker, 2015). Generally, however, undergraduate higher education in Canada is a four-year bachelor's program, entry to which is mediated by high school grade scores. Furthermore, entry into most 'elite' professional programs, such as medical doctor, dentistry, pharmacy, or law pathways, require either partial or full completion of an undergraduate degree, akin to graduate degrees (EduCanada, 2023; Walker, 2015).

In Canada, education past the high school or secondary level is referred to as post-secondary education (PSE). Within industry and literature, 'higher education' more commonly refers to the specific category of 'universities', which offer, at minimum, four-year undergraduate programming. The designation of a public 'research university' furthermore distinguishes institutions which also offer degree programing at the graduate and/or professional levels and conduct some measure of academic research activity. Of the research universities in Canada, the U15 group form a nationwide network of leading institutions, which collaborate to develop research innovation and ecosystem across Canada. These institutions are not equivalent in hierarchical status or prestige to, for example, the American Ivy League or the UK's Oxbridge, and do not necessarily equate to higher quality than some other research-intensive universities within the country. However, they remain some of the most prominent institutions within the sector, and as such, hold significant influence in setting examples for institutional policy and practice within the field (Davies & Zarifa, 2012; Tamtik & Guenter, 2019; U15, 2023; Usher & Balfour, 2023; Walker, 2015).

As there is no equivalent class of 'elite' institutions within Canada, there is a lower emphasis on ranking and vertical stratification between research universities. There is relatively low student mobility between provincial systems, as many students opt to pursue higher education within their provincial urban centres. Though institutional stratification and

ranking elitism is not yet a major determinant of inequality within the Canadian system, there remains possibility for a shift towards further vertical differentiation, as university administration push agendas of institutional emulation of top-ranking US-institutions and further drive neoliberal agendas of marketizing higher education and accreditation (Davies & Zarifa, 2012). At present, stratification within Canadian higher education is more prominently seen between disciplines, with the professional-vocational paths (e.g. medicine, law, and engineering) and STEM research upheld as prestigious and profitable through national narratives and research initiatives (Walker, 2015).

Graduate study is furthermore stratified through funding and scholarship. This funding is typically allocated through perceived merit or academic excellence (Côté & Allahar, 2011; Davies & Zarifa, 2012; Walker, 2015). There have been recent equity advances in this area, for example, with the introduction of the Black Scholars funding in Canada's Budget 2022, aimed to support Black students at the undergraduate, masters, doctoral, and post-doctoral levels, administered from 2023 to 2028 by the Tri-Council federal research bodies (NSERC, 2023). However, this is a preliminary and temporally limited funding opportunity, and there remains a significant lack of needs-based or targeted research funding available at the graduate level, which reinforces hierarchy within research and academia. In the most recent funding announcement, the Government of Canada announced increases in award values for federal scholarships and fellowships, effective September 1st, 2024. However, the proposed budget does not introduce any new awards to support initiatives targeted to bridge gaps in equity, demonstrating a continued emphasis on merit-based measures for financial awards and research support (Canada, 2024).

2.2.3 The myth of merit and the need for equity

The misconception of Canadian higher education and labour market outcomes being impartial and meritocratic has led to misunderstanding of how inequity is perpetuated through the system. While merit-based systems may be upheld as theoretically fair and unbiased, they often fail to recognize the social contexts within which they operate (Mijs, 2016; Mijs & Savage, 2020). This is particularly evident when viewing meritocracy with the insight of the Matthew Effect, which describes the phenomenon of the accumulation of privilege. A privileged student may have more flexibility in pursuing academics and careers, access to better schooling, and connections to industries through a pre-existing social network. This

allows them to develop relevant experiences and knowledge more effectively. When this individual then outcompetes someone who did not have these advantages, it cannot in good faith be considered a purely intellectual triumph. Additionally, this individual is better positioned to leverage their GPA and extracurriculars to secure funding and graduate positions. The Matthew Effect thus elucidates how advantage builds on itself and allows those who have it to continue to profit and accumulate advantages overtime (Mijs, 2016; Rigney, 2010; Walker, 2015). This furthermore leads to opportunity hoarding, as those who hold advantage occupy the majority of privileged opportunities within society (Rigney, 2010; Rury & Saatcioglu, 2015). As such, pure meritocracy cannot exist within the context of a system which privileges those who possess socioeconomic advantages (Mijs, 2016; Mijs & Savage, 2020).

Addressing stratification and inequity within the Canadian system is imperative, as these issues widen the gaps between socioeconomic class and social positioning (Marginson, 2016b, 2018). The implicit hierarchy of Canadian HE is established through the progressive streaming of students into prestigious graduate positions or industry-ready disciplines. This furthers stratification through the replication of existing systemic inequity, by way of social processes of advantage accumulation, under the illusion of meritocracy (Davies & Zarifa, 2012; Marginson, 2018; Mijs, 2016; Rigney, 2010; Walker, 2015). The operation of hierarchical streaming within Canadian HE and the neoliberal idealization of professional-vocational and graduate qualification, correlates to socioeconomic outcomes and social mobility, as illustrated in new graduate salary data (Usher, 2024; Walker, 2015). Consequently, material success and well-being are predicated on progressive academic achievement within the university. It is thus necessary to consider how the social context of inequity may be addressed at the institutional level. Since existing social inequity is broadly replicated through the university system and graduate labour market, the university must do what it can to address these gaps and minimize the bearing that social disadvantage may have on the success of students from minoritized backgrounds.

2.3 Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion—for whom does it matter?

2.3.1 Indigenous & racialized students

Despite Canada's forward-facing image of polite friendliness, the country harbours a dark history of colonialism and persisting racial and socioeconomic systemic inequity, masked by liberal idealizations of multiculturalism. Though Canada is a diverse and multiethnic country, the pervasive myth of political multiculturalism disguises a system that upholds whiteness as a normative standard and portrays racism as a thing of the past. This misrepresentation is perpetuated through popular culture, media, and narratives promoted by government and educational institutions (Berry, 2016; Dua et al., 2005; McGarry, 2008). The construction of systemic barriers and the implicit biases faced by minoritized populations, which work to reinforce socially constructed hierarchy, are acute issues continually faced by Indigenous and racialized peoples (Bailey, 2016; Canel-Çınarbaş & Yohani, 2019; Cénat et al., 2022; Clark et al., 2014; Dua et al., 2005; Houshmand & Spanierman, 2021; Poolokasingham et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2022).

Black, Indigenous, & People of Colour (BIPOC) populations face disadvantage within the Canadian education system. Indigenous peoples encounter substantial structural barriers and persistent challenges, as the historical roots of colonialism are entrenched and perpetuated in Canadian society through legislation, generational trauma and cultural assimilation via residential schools, and systemic racism within education and healthcare. Settler colonial attitudes and racism against Indigenous peoples, perpetuated both through systems and individuals, exacerbates the existing gaps in socioeconomic status and resource allocation (Bailey, 2016; Dua et al., 2005; Fonseca, 2020; Joncas & Pilote, 2021). Furthermore, in Canada, one in four people belong to a racialized minority group—otherwise termed as a 'visible minority' by Statistics Canada, defined as "persons, other than Aboriginal persons, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour" within the *Employment Equity Act* (StatCan, 2022). These groups face growing obstacles in society, as they are more than twice as likely than the rest of the population to face discrimination (StatCan, 2022).

Within higher education, Indigenous peoples are vastly underrepresented, as 9.6% of First Nations peoples, 13.2% of Metis, and 5.2% of Inuit populations attained a bachelor's degree or higher in 2016, leading to significant income disparity between those with differing

educational attainment (StatCan, 2018). Indigenous, Black, Filipino, and Latin American populations remain proportionally underrepresented amongst graduates who have obtained a bachelor's degree (Brunet & Galarneau, 2022; StatCan, 2018). Recent study furthermore shows there are significant discrepancies in educational outcomes between different ethnic population groups. Black and Latin American student outcomes in areas of bachelor's degree enrollment, STEM enrollment, and graduation were consistently low for both men and women. Furthermore, data suggests that Fillipino students were less likely to enrol in graduate or professional programming, which has significant implications for graduate labour market outcomes. Though White students had comparatively low enrolment in undergraduate education amongst all population groups, they are differentiated by being amongst the highest in terms of persistence and graduation rates, both generally and in STEM programs (Handler et al., 2024).

Indigenous and racialized students moreover often grapple with targeted microaggressions within higher education institutions. These interactions may tokenize individuals, invalidate their experiences, and stereotype and commodify peoples and their culture. This lends to a broader inhospitable environment which isolates and tarnishes students' experiences on campus and impacts their mental wellbeing (Agbaire, 2019; Bailey, 2016; Canel-Çınarbaş & Yohani, 2019; Cénat et al., 2022; Clark et al., 2014; Houshmand & Spanierman, 2021; McGarry, 2008; Poolokasingham et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2022).

It is, however, important to note that Asian-Canadians from Chinese, Korean, and (to a lesser degree) South Asian backgrounds, experience proportionally higher rates of success in undergraduate enrollment and educational attainment, and are overrepresented amongst graduates (Abada et al., 2009; Brunet & Galarneau, 2022; Handler et al., 2024). This may be attributed to their collective networks and cultural values, as well as confounding factors such as socioeconomic status and parental education (Birani & Lehmann, 2013; Childs, Finnie, & Mueller, 2017; Childs et al., 2018). However, the achievements of these ethnic groups do not mask the significant social challenges these groups may face. This includes racial prejudices and hostility due to perceptions of campuses becoming predominantly Asian (Birani & Lehmann, 2013; Dua et al., 2005; Poolokasingham et al., 2014) and rising hate crimes and racist sentiment against South Asians in Canada (Sinanan, 2024; StatCan, 2024). This general overachievement furthermore perpetuates stereotypes of inherent or superior ability attributed

to Asian diaspora, which may be detrimental to their ability to access support within the university (Birani & Lehmann, 2013).

2.3.2 First generation students

In higher education, first generation (FG) students similarly face systemic challenges. FG is a broadly defined and ambiguous category. The specific characterizations of parental or family education vary, with definitions of first-generation including: students whose parents or guardians did not attend any post-secondary education; first-in-family (FiF) students who are the first in their immediate family to attend HE; students whose parents or guardians attended some post-secondary education but have not attained a bachelor's degree or equivalent education (Lang, 2007; Zuo et al., 2018). Some institutional definitions in Canada also include immigrant students whose parents have obtained higher education qualifications abroad that are not transferrable or recognized within the Canadian education system or labour market (Lang, 2007; Wright et al., 2023). However, though such students may share some intersecting social identities, including unfamiliarity with the Canadian higher education landscape, the parental 'push'—the values and emphasis placed on education that influence the pursuit of and persistence in HE—and the potential social networks of the parents are not necessarily equivalent. (Finnie, 2014; Lang, 2007).

For the purposes of this study, 'first generation student' is defined as students whose parents do not possess any higher education credential at the bachelor's degree or equivalent level (StatCan, 2023), from Canada or elsewhere. This category broadly includes FiF students, students whose parents only possess high school education, and students whose parents have participated in some post-secondary education including college diplomas or vocational trades certifications (Allan et al., 2016; Beattie & Thiele, 2016; Zuo et al., 2018). There is furthermore concern within the field regarding the labelling of students as 'first-generation' and the insinuation of a reductionist identity surrounding FG students (Wildhagen, 2015). This study does not aim to impose the label of first-generation student on any individual's identity, but instead uses it as a descriptor which signifies a socially structured disadvantage faced by students who lack material and immaterial resources associated with parental education.

Both the involvement of parents in their children's lives and education and the resources available to parents have a direct impact on the educational outcomes of their children, which denotes the importance of parental interest and education level as a determinant of student attendance, attrition, and achievement in post-secondary settings (Childs, Finnie, & Mueller, 2017; Finnie et al., 2015). In using Bourdieu's conceptualizations of capital to understand resources, the institutionalized cultural capital of the parent in the form of educational qualification is converted into all other forms of capital: economic, as gained through access to higher earnings and job titles; social, through the development of professional and relational networks; objectified cultural, through the attainment of material objects which enhance student outcomes; and embodied cultural, through both knowledge and the values and emphasis placed on education (Bourdieu, 1986). Many studies on the trajectories of youth have shown that parental influence and their normative values, otherwise understood as their embodied cultural capital, have a significant impact in guiding the trajectories of their children and play a key determining factor in their children's transition into post-secondary or higher education. As parental education is predictive of children's education, these guiding values, parental motivations and pressures, and the resources parents can apply in their children's education are key in understanding student achievement and relative advantage or disadvantage. Capital, in this case, is not only convertible within the individual, but extended to the household, as it is shared and applied between the parents and the child (Bourdieu, 1973, 1986). While youth whose parents possess post-secondary and higher education are more likely to achieve post-secondary qualifications, the inverse is similarly true (Birani & Lehmann, 2013; Childs, Finnie, & Martinello, 2017; Childs, Finnie, & Mueller, 2017; Childs et al., 2018; Finnie, 2012, 2014; Finnie et al., 2015). The key takeaway in understanding the value of parental education is recognizing the combined influence of parental qualifications, which provide students with access to resources, and parental aspirations, which instill values prioritizing educational achievement in their children (Childs, Finnie, & Mueller, 2017; Finnie et al., 2015).

2.3.3 Intersecting social determinants

This study investigates the experiences of students who fall in the intersection of BIPOC and FG categories, as social determinants for educational persistence and achievement. Though I do not aim to prescribe or confine students to any identity label, it is important to acknowledge the circumstances of these individuals' lives which may cause

them to face systemic barriers in higher education structures. Furthermore, the analysis of this intersection in particular aims to address potential structural advantages held by those outside of this niche group. BIPOC students whose parents possess higher education benefit from the economic, social, and cultural capital associated with these qualifications, providing them with competitive benefit when accessing academic and career opportunities and accruing academic merit within HE. Meanwhile, white first-generation students gain advantages from their social and cultural capital, aligned with normative perceptions of whiteness in hegemonic social structures. Additionally, they may adapt more easily to HE environments due to a lack of racially motivated social stigma.

While this study explores the intersection of experiences related to BIPOC and FG, individual identities often crosscut many other social determinants which impact unique circumstances and experiences. Though not controlled for amongst participants in this research, there is strong evidence that suggests educational achievement—of both students and their parents—may additionally be impacted by socioeconomic status (Gorard & See, 2009; Johnson et al., 2010; Rothstein, 2013; Sullivan, 2001) and that there is furthermore correlation between race or immigration status/generation and class (Gans, 2005; Park et al., 2019; Portes & MacLeod, 1996). A study on Canadian youth found that lower academic performance and lower parental educational attainment accounted for nearly three-fourths of the gap in enrolment between low- and high-income youth (Frenette, 2007). The working-class background of an individual may additionally impact how the individual engages with higher education, from financial considerations for tuition and living costs, to academic planning, motivations for academic goals, and personal definitions of success (Reay, 2001; Reay et al., 2001). Furthermore, other aspects of being may crosscut the experiences of individuals, including gender, sexuality, neurodiversity and mental health, physical health, and age. Crenshaw's intersectionality theory proposes the compounding effect of intersecting social determinants and the overlapping arenas of systemic barriers potentially faced by individuals who fall under multiple intersecting axes of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989; Harris & Leonardo, 2018). In her words, "intersectionality is a metaphor for understanding the ways that multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage sometimes compound themselves and create obstacles that often are not understood among conventional ways of thinking" (Crenshaw, 1989, pp. 149). While being BIPOC FG falls under the theoretical assumption of intersecting and compounding effects, there remain other factors which affect the experiences of these individuals, not specifically interrogated in this research.

2.4 Student support and EDI practices in U15 institutions

Higher education institutions provide various mechanisms aimed at supporting student academics and well-being, from generalized systems and services to more targeted policies and initiatives. Examples of generalized support may include academic or career advising, academic tutoring or support, and counselling and health services, all of which vary in scope of institution-wide or faculty/department specific service (Cox & Strange, 2010; Dhillon et al., 2006; Grant-Vallone et al., 2003; Hoyt, 2023; Jacklin & Le Riche, 2009; Michalski et al., 2017; Thomas et al., 2002; Wilmer, 2008). Seeing how BIPOC first-generation students interact with the service side of the academe may provide insight into how to best make these services inclusive. Approaches to understanding the experiences of racialized and/or first-generation minoritized students in Western-Anglo contexts have included: investigating their general experiences (typically within a specific institution and/or faculty) (Bailey, 2016; Birani & Lehmann, 2013; Canel-Çınarbaş & Yohani, 2019; Clark et al., 2014; Demetriou et al., 2017; Jehangir et al., 2015; Poolokasingham et al., 2014; Robson et al., 2018; Santa-Ramirez et al., 2022; Swidrovich, 2021; Wright et al., 2023); generally investigating student support services (Grant-Vallone et al., 2003; Hoyt, 2023; Jacklin & Le Riche, 2009); and investigating the experiences of a specific marginalized group with a specific student support or program (Grilo et al., 2024; Joncas & Pilote, 2021; Stebleton et al., 2014; Zhou et al., 2021).

There is a lack of research done within the Canadian context on the specific intersection of BIPOC FG students and investigating their general experiences with a broad range of institutional supports. However, Joncas & Pilote's (2021) study, which delved into the role of guidance professionals in the development of the capabilities of Indigenous women in HE, provided findings that may be broadly applicable to many minoritized groups. They determined that informed guidance professionals and university-provided support can be key facilitators in the development of students and the achievement of their personal goals. However, if this guidance is not aware of the social realities, needs, and systemic barriers affecting marginalized students, it may become an obstruction to their development. Their research furthermore concludes that students who face systemic disadvantage require proactive interventions which address structural barriers (Joncas & Pilote, 2021)

Research furthermore emphasizes the necessity of developing inclusive and adequate support services and environments for underrepresented and minoritized students, in tandem with efforts to facilitate equitable access to higher education (Michalski et al., 2017). Critical policy analysis of the EDI strategies, outlined in a variety of plans, charters, reports, and other policy documents published by U15 institutions in Canada, highlight a range of limitations in institutional policy and practice (Tamtik & Guenter, 2019). University policies tended to generalize equity, diversity, and inclusion under a single broad definition, which portrayed EDI as "slogan-like" (Tamtik & Guenter, 2019, pp. 46). EDI in many universities was commonly approached as equity-as-inclusion, which often leads to tokenization and inequitable treatment by providing only minimal support. In contrast, an equity-as-fairness approach acknowledges structural and systemic barriers and aims to maximize the achievement of marginalized groups, including through processes of reconciliation and decolonization (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Tamtik & Guenter, 2019). The institutional climate of equity, diversity, and inclusion are likewise of crucial consideration in policy development, as they are shaped by ongoing efforts to advance equity within these spaces (Tamtik & Guenter, 2019). Despite the implementation of these EDI plans across Canadian institutions, data shows significant challenges to progress remain, including "a lack of resources; difficulty attracting and retaining diverse talent, including in senior leadership; institutional systems, policies, structures and cultures that can hinder progress; a lack of data on institutional challenges; and insufficient information on best practices for EDI" (Universities Canada, 2019, pp. 5). Research furthermore indicates that institutions have not met their EDI commitments, as there is significant resistance to structural change which would allow for meaningful initiatives to address inequity (MacKenzie et al., 2023). Taken together, there is a significant need for improved approaches in the development of EDI policy and practice.

Understanding how to best support students is rooted in understanding their needs. Analysis of EDI policy suggests there is room for improvement in explicitly including the voices of those from under-represented and marginalized groups in the development of institutional practices (Tamtik & Guenter, 2019). Student-led and student-informed initiatives to support EDI foster the agency of marginalized students and their sense of belonging within the university. They furthermore shift perceptions of institution-led practices from being seen as symbolic gestures to being recognized as meaningful and effective (Ovink & Murrell, 2022). Though structural challenges may remain, first-hand student experiences may

transform the student from their perceived role as a consumer of HE to that of a partner and important stakeholder, and thus inform discernment into best practices to support marginalized students (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020; Naidoo et al., 2011; Ovink & Murrell, 2022).

2.5 Conceptual framework

2.5.1 Agency

It is critical to emphasize agency as integral to the student experience, as agentic processes shape students' trajectories, perceptions of capability, and their individual project-making (Hobson & Zimmermann, 2023; Marginson, 2023). In higher education, agency relates to the student's ability to meaningfully navigate their unique educational pathways. Broadly, this includes their ability to exercise self-efficacy, self-direction, and self-determination, amongst other agentic ways of being, which play a key role in development (Klemenčič, 2023). Agency is a dynamic and relational process, the capacity for which is not necessarily individually dictated, but is rather deeply embedded in social contexts and structures. There is a double constitution of agency and structure, as social structures, such as norms, institutions, and cultural practices, shape individual actions—which may in turn transform the structures themselves. Agency is furthermore embedded within time, as an individual's actions and aspirations are informed by their past and present experiences. Both social networks—in how relationships may provide resources, supports, or obstacles which influence individuals' abilities to act—and structural influences—which may facilitate or hinder individual actions—shape the agency of a student. This dynamic, relational nature denotes that agency presents differently across varied contexts. Dependent on the structures in which students operate, they may have more or less freedom in their actions (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

By understanding both the malleability and importance of agency in shaping students' life trajectories, it becomes clear that fostering agency is a crucial component in promoting the development of their capabilities. To be able to convert the resources and opportunities an individual can access, they must be able to exercise agency. As agency develops dialectically through students' past and present experiences within social and structural contexts, it raises

questions about the extent of future projects an individual may imagine for themselves or feel entitled to, based on their accumulated experiences. To exercise agentic ways of being within HE, students must be unhindered by social and structural constraints. Social positioning, limited access to resources and opportunities, and the perpetuation of systemic inequity within hierarchical structures of HE may pose challenges in the progression of the student. Conversely, agency development may be triggered by such changing or mobile circumstances (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Hobson & Zimmermann, 2023; Klemenčič, 2023; Marginson, 2023). Agency is key to student conversion of resources and opportunities into progress in their individual projects, thus related to the building of student capabilities (Hobson & Zimmermann, 2023; Klemenčič, 2023). This highlights the importance of promoting inclusive and supportive environments which foster the agency of minoritized students within stratified systems of higher education (Klemenčič, 2023).

2.5.2 Sen's capability approach

Capabilities are elaborated through Amartya Sen's capability approach and is used to operationalize the combination of student agency and resource access. This approach sees the lives of individuals as a set of 'doings and beings', otherwise referred to as 'functionings', and as such assesses quality of life through one's capability to function (Sen, 1989). Capability necessitates both the ability and resources required to achieve a function and the freedom to achieve the function. Simply exemplified, if an individual possesses a book and has the ability to read but does not have the time to read because of external commitments, that individual does not have the capability to read the book. This emphasis on a person's freedom to choose how they live, or their agency, as a key element of their capabilities, contrasts utilitarian notions of value. This elucidates the concept of 'process freedom', the individual's ability to dictate their own goals and values (Sen, 1989; Walker, 2013).

Both the resources and freedoms necessary to achieve functionings are limited in scope by the relative socioeconomic positioning of individuals—as such, individual capabilities are influenced by the circumstances of the individual. This points to the importance of fostering capabilities to achieve equitable education. Diverse student populations are comprised of individuals of differing backgrounds. The disparity in their experiences and opportunities in turn affect their educational outcomes. As such, effective capability formation is conditional upon the social arrangements of a university and its

structures, as much as it is on individual student engagement. The relational context in which the student exercises their agency is thus crucial to the development of capabilities in students, as supportive and equitable environments may conduce access to freedoms and resources (Sen, 1989; Unterhalter, 2009; Walker, 2013).

Capability approach is deliberately ambiguous in its definitions, as it aims to assess well-being through the diverse doings and beings of individuals from differing life paths. In implementing capability approach, there must be choice involved in the descriptions of functionings, which permits the inclusion of differently defined achievements. This approach accounts for understanding individual experiences and capabilities based on what they want to achieve, thus assessing their freedom to pursue personally defined goals. It avoids prescribing pre-determined overarching goals that may not align with an individual's unique life experiences or circumstances (Sen, 1989).

The notion of personal freedom in all aspects of life is integral to understanding capability as a space for measuring equity in economic development and personal fulfilment; freedom and capabilities operate cyclically through positive feedback, as achievements of functionings can translate to skills or resources utilized in other aspects of life to gain increasing freedoms. As such, education is crucial to the development of capabilities and the ability to exercise freedom, as it can relate to the growth of productivity, the conversion of finances and resources into different functionings and ways of living, and the ability to make informed life decisions. Development through to higher education allows individuals to participate in modern economies and society, in roles inaccessible otherwise. Education is furthermore a catalyst of social change and social affirmation—individuals are empowered through education and consequently foster their agency, thus are better equipped to overcome marginalization in hierarchical societies (Dreze & Sen, 2003; Sen, 1989; Unterhalter, 2009; Walker, 2013).

2.5.3 Operationalizing the conceptual framework

Understandings of agency and the capability approach are operationalized within this study to capture a nuanced understanding of diverse student experiences within institutional structures and social contexts. By employing the understanding of process freedom, students can dictate their own understandings of progress and support within the institution, as they

align with their own goals and values. By positioning students as agentic individuals coming into university from their unique social backgrounds, it is possible to develop a comprehensive understanding of how social and institutional contexts impact their ability to exercise agency, develop their capabilities, and achieve their self-defined goals within higher education. This conceptual framework is applied to understand how student functioning is mediated by the resources and freedoms afforded to them within their personal circumstances and in higher education institutions. In doing so, students may elaborate on the institutional environments and supports which either inhibited or promoted their access to necessary resources and freedoms to develop capabilities relevant to their individual goals and projects. This approach is crucial in understanding how social arrangements and structures influence equitable capability development amongst diverse student bodies. Capability approach thus captures diverse perspectives and experiences of agentic students while recognizing social and structural systemic barriers (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Sen, 1989; Unterhalter, 2009; Walker, 2013).

Chapter 3. Methodology

3.1 Research paradigm

The interpretivist research paradigm of this study is the philosophical framework within which the research purpose, questions, and methods are formed (Spencer et al., 2020). This paradigm is comprised of a set of co-evolving philosophical positionings—axiology, ontology, and epistemology—through which I view and interpret the research. The nature of the tangential and interlinked development of philosophies results in similarly aligned and co-influenced approaches (Allen & Varga, 2007).

Axiology is the pursuit of ascribing value and applies to how one perceives and interprets the study context. This philosophy can be understood as my underlying motivation or catalyst for this research. It influences my ontological and epistemological positions, as my perceptions of value and significance have shaped the direction and nature of the research conducted (Allen & Varga, 2007; Hart, 1971). Equity and social justice are my primary motivations for conducting research into the higher education experiences of BIPOC FG students. In understanding the unique experiences and challenges faced by minoritized students, I aim to platform these voices and establish the importance of including their narratives in the development of institutional practices and EDI. This research seeks to advance social justice and equity-as-fairness in higher education by addressing the specific needs of individuals within inequitable systems, aligning with my personal values and positioning (Unterhalter, 2009; Walster & Walster, 1975).

Ontology and epistemology are respectively the philosophical assumptions of how one views the world and social contexts of the research and how one processes and acquires knowledge of their social reality (Allen & Varga, 2007; Smith, 2012; Steup & Neta, 2005). I describe and critically examine the research context by recognizing that social reality is constructed and negotiated through the interplay of multiple social and cultural forces and societal systems and structures, which are predominantly hierarchical in nature. Informed by axiological assumptions of equity and social justice, this research challenges hegemonic and normative understandings of reality and, as such, adopts an ontology of relativism (Gura, 1992). This relativistic understanding of social contexts impacts how knowledge is constructed and understood in this research. By applying an epistemology of subjectivism,

this study assumes that knowledge is constructed, understood, and communicated as a diversity of co-existing truths, informed by individuals' experiences, and mediated by common social structures. Knowledge is constructed by individuals as they interpret their reality within a given context. A cohesive body of subjective knowledge acknowledges the diverse experiences shared by those within similar social contexts and positions (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; White, 2007).

These philosophical assumptions form the fabric of the interpretivist paradigm which shapes this study and guides the methodological choices made in my research design (Allen & Varga, 2007). Interpretivism is cognizant of individual meanings and assumes a subjective understanding of social reality. The interpretivist paradigm thus operates primarily through qualitative research design, as these methods are best suited for gaining deep insight into individuals' experiences within a specified context (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020).

3.2 Data collection

In this study, I use semi-structured interviews for qualitative data collection. I selected this method because of its frequent use in interpretivist qualitative studies, as it allows for gaining deep insight into the personal experiences and subjective knowledge of individuals. By interviewing these students, their personal narratives reveal how their experiences and subjective knowledge shapes their reality. Aligned with the ontological and epistemological positioning of this study, this subjective knowledge is understood within a common social context to develop a deeper understanding of the shared experiences of those in similar circumstances (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Brinkmann, 2014).

Participant interviews focused on student identity and background, academic and life experiences, definitions of success, self and societal perceptions, and their views and expectations of higher education institutions and systems. An interview topic guide can be found in Appendix D. All interviews were within the range of 55 minutes to 1 hour and 10 minutes in length, were conducted virtually via Microsoft Teams, and transcribed automatically. Video conferencing was not required for participants, with three participants opting for an audio-only interviews. In-person interviews were not possible for this research, as I was based in the UK while participants were in Canada. However, empirical studies have

noted an insignificant difference in the depth of rapport and participant disclosure between in-person and online one-on-one interviews (Jenner & Myers, 2019), justifying the use of virtual communication for this study.

The semi-structured interviews were primarily guided by participants, with prompting as needed, resulting in unique narrative data that covered a broad range of topics. This open-ended conversational method allowed flexibility in exploring topics relevant to each individual, aligning with the interpretivist research paradigm in allowing students to articulate their personal frames of reference and communicate their subjective understandings of their social realities (Brinkmann, 2014; May, 2011; White, 2007).

The interview aimed to achieve the conditions of accessibility, cognition, and motivation, in order to maintain the integrity and quality of participant-researcher interactions and the subsequent data yielded through the interview process (May, 2011). Accessibility, or the participant's access to relevant knowledge, is presumed to have been met, as students provided narrative accounts based on their life experiences and personal opinions. However, this assumption is made with the caveat that the personal nature of the interview, the lack of a developed relationship between myself and the participants, and the constraints of the interview format, may have led to hesitance or difficulty for students in fully expressing the nuances of their individual accounts.

Furthermore, it is assumed that student responses are implicitly informed by the questions asked and topics covered, their own understandings of the research context, and their assumptions of what they believe is relevant to the researcher. As the collected data is subjective, it is relevant to note that the responses shared by the students are shaped by their own life paths, including but not limited to how time and further experience may shape their understandings. This understanding posits that the narratives and perspectives shared in these interviews may not reflect a fully nuanced depiction of the participant in a natural setting and are not constant representations of these students, as their subjective knowledge may evolve as they progress through life and gain new experiences. As such, I do not make any broad claims of universality, but instead aim to communicate the voices of these students as they were shared at the time of study (Alshenqeeti, 2014; Hammersley & Gomm, 2008; May, 2011).

The latter conditions of cognition—ensuring the student fully understands their role in the study and what is expected of them—and motivation—communicating the importance and value the student's participation holds in the research—falls to the responsibility of the researcher (May, 2011). This study fulfilled both these conditions through thorough communication with the participants in the form of shared participant information sheets (Appendix B), informed consent forms (Appendix C), email communication before and after interviews, and interview preamble and closing statements. All participants were given appropriate prior insight into the study and provided with ample opportunity at any point of the research to ask clarifying questions or provide feedback on the process. Participation in this study was greatly appreciated and deeply valued, as this research flourished from the authentic and open communication of the interviewed students.

3.3 Participants

3.3.1 Recruitment

This study involved Canadian students aged 18 and over who identified as both Black, Indigenous, or a Person of Colour (BIPOC) and as a first-generation (FG) student, as previously defined in the research context. To reach potential participants, emails containing information on the study (Appendix B) were sent out to a wide range of publicly available contacts at Canadian U15 universities, including student support services, administrators, faculty, and student organizations. The call for participants was also shared through social media, primarily Instagram, where students were reached through peer circles or through outreach to student clubs and coalitions.

Participant recruitment took place alongside data collection from the end of February to mid-May. As a pre-screening method, interested students completed a brief application questionnaire via Microsoft Forms, which gathered minimal information to identify their fit within the study context. The participant criteria were expanded from the original CUREC application. Initially, the aim was to recruit BIPOC FG students in their penultimate or final year of a four-year undergraduate program at a Canadian U15 institution. This criterion was broadened to include BIPOC FG students at any level of undergraduate or graduate study at a U15 institution, to capture a wider range of perspectives. Of the 51 applications, 31 met the

criteria of being BIPOC FG students at a U15 institution. Although the participant criteria did not differentiate between domestic and international student status, all eligible participants were domestic students. Those who met the criteria were contacted via email to obtain consent and schedule interviews. Of the 31 contacted, 14 did not respond, 2 scheduled but missed their interviews, and 15 were confirmed as participants.

3.3.2 Confirmed Study Participants

To ensure anonymization, each student has been assigned a pseudonym for use in the research. All potentially identifying information, except for references to their ethnicity, parental education, and program of study, has been removed from their interview data. As such, their university and province of study have not been included alongside their degree program information. Overall, there were seven students from Alberta, six from Ontario, and two from British Columbia. There was a relatively even distribution of students of different ethnicities, with representation of Indigenous First Nation (1), Black and/or Caribbean (3), Arab (Middle East and/or North African) (2), West Asian (1), Chinese (2), South Asian (2), Southeast Asian (2), Filipino (1), and Latin American (1) communities. Of the non-Indigenous students, there was an even split between first-generation immigrant (born outside of Canada) and second-generation immigrant (parents born outside of Canada) individuals. As first-generation student status was defined as parents not having an undergraduate university degree, the participants had a broad range of parental education levels, from no certificate, diploma, or degree to college, CEGEP, or other non-university certificates or diplomas. The full pseudonymized profile of participants can be found below.

Fig. 1. Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Parental Education	Degree	Year, Expected Graduation
Isabella	Latin American	High (secondary) school or equivalency	Bachelor of Education (After-Degree), Secondary Education	6th/4th, June 2024
Fatima	South Asian	College, CEGEP or other non-university certificate/diploma	Bachelor of Arts, Sociology Major, Special Education Minor	5th, May 2024
Aisha	West Asian	No certificate, diploma or degree	Bachelor of Arts, Psychology Major, Religious Studies Minor	1st, June 2028
Trevor	Indigenous (First Nation)	High (secondary) school or equivalency	Bachelor of Education, Social Studies Major	3rd, June 2025

Anna	Black and/or Caribbean	High (secondary) school or equivalency	Master of Science, Integrative Bioscience Kinesiology	1st, Unknown
David	Black and/or Caribbean	College, CEGEP or other non-university certificate/diploma	Bachelor of Science, Honours Life Sciences	2nd, June 2026
Braydon	Chinese	No certificate, diploma or degree	Bachelor of Science, Mechanical & Biomedical Engineering	2nd, June 2026
Song	Chinese	High (secondary) school or equivalency	Bachelor of Business in Real Estate	2nd, April 2024
Maryam	Arab (Middle Eastern or North African)	No certificate, diploma or degree	Bachelor of Science, Biology Major	2nd, June 2026
Thomas	Southeast Asian	High (secondary) school or equivalency	Bachelor of Science, Geology Major, Archaeology Major	1st, Unknown
Emma	Black and/or Caribbean	Apprenticeship or trades certificate / diploma	Bachelor of Arts, Psychology Major, Philosophy Major	3rd, June 2025
Mackenzie	Southeast Asian	High (secondary) school or equivalency	Bachelor of Education, Secondary Education	2nd, June 2026
Sheldon	Filipino	College, CEGEP or other non-university certificate/diploma	Bachelor of Science, Mechanical Engineering	3rd, June 2026
Kabir	South Asian	High (secondary) school or equivalency	Juris Doctor	2L, June 2025
Amal	Arab (Middle Eastern or North African)	High (secondary) school or equivalency	Bachelor of Arts, Psychology Major	2nd, Jan 2026

3.4 Data analysis

The transcripts collected from individual semi-structured interviews were processed and analyzed as the primary dataset of this study. In employing interpretivist methods and understanding this data as subjective and polyvocal, attention must be called to the role of the researcher in analyzing and understanding the narratives of the participants (Brinkmann, 2014; Robson & McCartan, 2016).

The data collected in this study is processed using reflexive thematic analysis. Reflexivity plays a key role in critically examining my values, expectations, and assumptions, and how these may shape the insights gained and their presentation. I recognize that

knowledge is co-constructed through the research process and cannot be free from researcher influence. However, reflexivity serves as a quality control tool, allowing me to question and challenge assumptions and contextualize the study within its research environment. Thematic analysis of the data furthermore offers a flexible design approach for engaging with the narrative-rich data gained through broad research questions which focus on the subjective experiences and perceptions of individuals. The flexibility of this analysis is contained within the philosophical assumptions and theoretical framework of the study. Thus, it provides an open-ended approach to developing coherent and rational themes that align with the research context (Braun et al., 2022; Finlay & Gough, 2008).

To ensure reflexivity in this study, analytical themes were developed recursively throughout data collection and initial processing. Field notes from interviews were compiled and compared, to identify emerging commonalities. These commonalities were cross-checked and expanded upon during the initial review of the transcript data, after data collection was completed. An exhaustive list of relevant topics from the interviews was then established, reorganized, and grouped under five thematic umbrellas. These groupings considered topic interrelations, philosophical assumptions, theoretical and conceptual understandings, and research questions. The narrative data was subsequently thematically organized using NVivo qualitative data analysis software, to develop a comprehensive framework for the study's findings (Peel, 2020). These thematic findings and discussion are presented in the following chapter. Student voices and personal narratives are preserved to highlight the distinctive experiences and diversity of individuals within this study and Canadian higher education. The multiplicity of perspectives shared by participants is presented through snapshots of their personal narratives and insights quoted and referenced in the findings and discussion (Peel, 2020).

3.5 Positionality

Interpretivist research emphasizes that the subjectivity of narrative data indicates the potential for multiple readings. The analysis and understanding of the data in this study is influenced by both the study context and my background (Brinkmann, 2014). I aimed to maintain an unbiased and critically reflexive position throughout the collection and analysis

process. However, the research objectives, interview topics, and the details explored during and after the interviews are influenced by my own experiences and understandings.

I am a racialized minority (BIPOC) with extensive experience in the Canadian education system, which provides me with some in-group status and a (potentially limited) first-hand understanding of Canadian schooling and university. However, I am not a first-generation student, as defined in this study. My familiarity with the research context helped me pursue relevant topics and connect more deeply with participants who shared similar experiences. Nonetheless, I remained vigilant in challenging my preconceived expectations and potential implicit assumptions based on my own experiences.

Though there is potential for unrecognized implicit biases to have been present in the research process, I conversely believe my positionality provided the opportunity for driving the depth of the topics covered and allowed for nuanced insight into applicable topics. I believe the shared experiences and first-hand knowledge of relevant areas of discussion strengthened my motivations for the research, the quality of the interviews, and the subsequent insight gained. In the analysis process, the collected data was analyzed wholistically, and I was careful to account for the variety of perspectives shared by all the unique participants, free from my personal assumptions.

3.6 Ethics

The Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) application for this study was approved by the University of Oxford Education Departmental Research Ethics Committee (Appendix A) prior to the commencement of participant recruitment. Select U15 universities required secondary ethics clearance to reach students through official university channels. Secondary ethics and recruitment approval was obtained from most universities which requested it; for other institutions which required secondary ethics clearance for recruitment, but there was a clash of administrative and research timelines, approval and recruitment was not pursued. The ethical implications of this work concern the personal nature of the narratives shared by participants about their experiences within their institutions. By sharing details about their university experiences, students provided information that made them easily identifiable. There is potential risk if individuals are

recognizable from the data presentation, particularly if participants shared private stories or critiqued their university and administration. If personal narratives were traced back to individuals, this could lead to negative repercussions from their community and institution, potentially affecting their social relationships, educational goals, and professional careers. Moreover, negative comments from students could unfairly damage the university's reputation, as they may not reflect the experiences of all students. To mitigate these risks, all identifying information about participants and references to specific institutions or programs have been removed from the data presented in the study. This measure protects the identities of students and institutions by preventing the testimony from being traced back to any specific individual. Additionally, all raw data from participant interviews has been securely stored on University of Oxford servers and will not be shared in its original form.

3.7 Rigour

This research aims to satisfy the criteria for excellent qualitative research, as outlined by Tracy (2010). As mentioned in the axiological drive of the research, the topic of this study is relevant and significant in its social justice orientation for supporting the experiences of minoritized students within Canadian HE. There is rich rigour embedded within the established research context, the encompassing agency and capability approach theoretical framework, and the transparent and thorough disclosure of data collection and analysis processes. The self-reflexivity and positionality of the study furthermore contributes to the sincerity of the research. Credibility is demonstrated in the presented data through the multivocality of the participants and subsequent crystallization of thematic understandings. The research resonates with a variety of audiences by highlighting common student experiences that are transferable across different populations and applicable in diverse higher education contexts. This lends to the significant contribution of this study, as a novel approach to understanding BIPOC FG student experiences which inform effective inclusive support practices in Canadian HE. There is substantial consideration given to the ethical process of this research and preserving ethics through anonymization and sharing authentic participant testimony. This study aims to meaningfully integrate within the larger body of research and relevant context, as described within research contexts and methodology (Tracy, 2010).

Chapter 4. Findings & Discussion

Participants shared diverse accounts of their experiences in Canadian U15 research institutions, revealing a clear narrative interpreted through five overarching themes: (1) transitions to higher education, including motivations and support in accessing university; (2) navigation of systemic challenges, including obstacles encountered and accessibility of institutional supports; (3) the importance of building social networks with peers and mentors; (4) experiences overcoming obstacles, including adapting to university environments and the value of effective, equitable support; and (5) perceptions of the university as an equitable space, with recommendations for progress in equity, diversity, and inclusion based on students' lived experiences.

4.1 Transitions to higher education

4.1.1 Motivations & challenges in pursuing higher education

Participants widely agreed on the value of higher education and its role in socioeconomic mobility, benefiting not only themselves but also their families, communities, and future generations. Kabir stated, "I get to be the first person in my own family [to complete university], and hopefully I can pay that forward. Whether it's a friend or somebody else in the future." Emma furthermore stated that "My parents have worked so hard to come to this country. I want to navigate higher education and make the best life for myself." In many such cases, this was interpreted as a sense of duty internalized within the participants to achieve a level of education their parent(s) had made significant sacrifices for them to pursue.

For students who exemplified such feelings within their motivations for pursuing higher education, there was evident agency in their self-drive and advocacy. Students demonstrated this in owning the decision to pursue higher education through intrinsic motivation born of their past experiences and future expectations. This positions students as agentic beings who enter higher education with a sense of purpose, exercising such agency in relation to the structural contexts they find themselves in (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Klemenčič, 2023).

In multiple cases, there was a heavy emphasis placed on the communities and schools from which students were coming from. There was general acknowledgment of how coming from an underprivileged secondary education experience impacted the ability to easily acclimatize to university environments. David detailed:

> I realized that many people had much more advanced education. … It was the first time in my life I was like, oh, systemic racism. It's like you wanna do super well and you work really, really hard, … but then you see others and you're like, I could have technically done better if I'd been given a better chance when I moved here, if … they had placed me in the best school possible, [with] … [International Baccalaureate]—which I didn't know existed— … instead of being at an underfunded school.

Fatima furthermore spoke to her upbringing in a historically underprivileged, primarily immigrant area, where there was a lack of expectations and intervention from higher education institutions during secondary schooling. She stated,

> It was like we were prepared for trades careers; we were only given those options. We didn't have speakers from [local universities] coming to talk to us about … what we were going to experience in university.

There is furthermore an acknowledgement of how inequitable social structures maintain cycles of disadvantage. David commented,

> These kids are gonna … wind up not going to university. They're gonna get underpaying jobs. They're gonna become poor and their children are gonna become poor and go to the same school that they went to. And it's gonna become a cycle for all of these immigrant children, just like myself.

There was further discussion of the impacts of operating within culturally hegemonic social structures. Isabella and Song discussed the hurdles they have faced in monolingual, English-dominated environments, as recent immigrants to Canada from different language backgrounds. Isabella spoke strongly to the barriers she faced, resulting from an administrative decision which had significant impact on her sense of self and her transition to university:

> When I was in the ESL program, they would put me in the [lower stream] courses rather than [upper stream courses], which impacted my self-esteem, because there were moments when I was like, maybe I am the problem? … But then after … I found myself struggling with the language, but knowing what the content was [in upper

> stream courses]. I graduated grade 12, but because I wanted to go to college, I had to upgrade [my courses] … and so, did an extra year of high school.

This acknowledgment of the social and structural relational contexts that shape students' past experiences highlights the circumstances under which agency has developed for these students, as they transition into higher education. There is an implicit acknowledgment that students were able to persevere and develop their agency within their social structures, though this may not be the case for many of their peers in similar positions, as highlighted in the discussion of the educational environments and influences they encountered before entering university. This further speaks to the discussion surrounding equity and capability, as students' resources and freedoms impacted their individual projects and social imaginings. Establishing this context is crucial in recognizing that many minoritized students enter higher education having already overcome significant structural barriers and challenges in their capability development, relative to their more privileged peers.

4.1.2 Independence & support

The participants in this study demonstrated a great deal of agency through their self-efficacy and initiative in their transition to HE and throughout their university education. With varying access to structures and social networks of support available to them, all participants navigated their transition to higher education relatively independently.

Amal described her lack of guidance for navigating higher education as a mature first-generation student, stating: “I'm first in my family to be attending university, so my parents really have no guidance on that. Neither do my elder siblings or friends … who graduated 5 to 10 years ago.” Sheldon echoed this sentiment, sharing that “[My parents] did provide moral support. But, speaking of helping me with applying for things or advice, I had to do research by myself.” Trevor, who grew up and received his primary and secondary education on-reservation, recounted “I was learning how to navigate in a world that was foreign to me. … I did not have that guidance and reassurance that everything that I was doing was OK and that made it difficult to open up.”

Thomas added to how the secondary and peer environments are also crucial to supporting transition, sharing “not that many people within my school, let alone my friends, planned to go to post-secondary. So I did not really have an informed idea … until recently.” Fatima elaborated on unsupportive cultural communities: “I've had friends whose parents have said to them, ‘what is the point of university? You can just go work and make the same amount of money!’”

Of particular note, Trevor highlighted the decisive role of colonial narratives and self-fulfilling prophecies impacting his agency and transition to higher education, stating,

> I was very dependent on the colonial prospect of education, where I didn't necessarily believe that I was self-sufficient. I had to be guided into wanting to pursue post-secondary. … It was a challenging experience for me to believe that I had what it took.

The concept of familial and social support establishes the relational context which influences the development of student agency. In some cases, a perceived lack of support within students' personal social networks fostered their sense of agency, while in others, it limited their ability to self-advocate in unfamiliar environments. Overall, their success in navigating the transition depended on the extent of agency they could exercise and the structural constraints they faced. Furthermore, this draws attention to the salience of hierarchical and colonial expectations as a component of social structural contexts for agency and capability development. The narratives and expectations imposed upon students play a major role in shaping what projects they imagine for themselves and the abilities they engage.

For Maryam, despite demonstrating agentic self-advocacy and drive to prepare for university, she still struggled with this transition. She communicated that,

> I thought I had done everything in my power to prepare myself for university … I'm signing up for all these mentor programs … I'm going to all of these webinars online through COVID. But I come to university and like just absolutely flop on my face.

Despite doing her best to use preparatory resources, the available support was not effective enough to compensate for the difficult transition she had to navigate independently.

Students who perceived themselves as struggling or having ‘failed’ to achieve a successful transition indicated a lack of resources and/or freedoms. The lack of resources is aggregated here to include: lack of access to educational materials, skills, and knowledge; lack of parental support or input into the transition process; lack of experiential and anecdotal knowledge of HE; and lack of social networks to alleviate any of these deficits. The lack of freedoms was interpreted as reflecting unresponsive community and cultural perspectives, as well as systemic barriers related to race and socioeconomic status. Various factors may have influenced a student's ability to not only enroll but also thrive according to their own standards of academic success within higher education. This furthermore has compounding and long-term effects on the trajectories of these students, as it impacts their agency and perceived capability as they continue on in higher education (Hobson & Zimmermann, 2023; Sen, 1989).

Understanding the limiting factors which impact students’ capabilities in the transition to HE and the supports, or lack thereof, to account for these deficiencies is crucial in understanding how to set students up for success. Although some resources and freedoms described by students cannot be directly addressed by universities, community engagement and initiatives may help alleviate some of the burdens caused by inadequate support systems or a lack of knowledge about pathways and options. For instance, a social justice-oriented approach that does not subjectify or victimize certain communities fosters the transformation of partnerships between the community and the university. Rather than alienating students in their pathways, a justice-oriented connection between the university and the community sees students intrinsically motivated and integrated locally, transforming the relationship into one of collaboration rather than charity. These university-community partnerships aim to view the community as an equal partner (Marullo & Edwards, 2000). This approach is crucial in mitigating the obstacles students face during their transition. It exposes students to the university environment and its members at an earlier age, building a cultural bridge to these institutions and better equipping more students to feel comfortable pursuing higher education.

4.2 Navigating systemic challenges in higher education

4.2.1 Challenges and barriers

In their narratives, students described how resources and freedoms, or lack thereof, from their personal social contexts compounded in effect with the institutional structure of the university, and how this impacted their capability to achieve personally defined measures of success.

Socioeconomic circumstances often influenced the decisions and outcomes of students, as they navigated balancing the demands of higher education, extracurricular involvement, academic and career competition, and their personal needs. Financial responsibilities and structure of degree paths influenced student choices. David explains his reasoning to prioritize his general employability over optimizing his CV for medical school applications, stating,

> I work two part time jobs. I do all those extracurriculars, … I have to because I have to eventually support my parents. Like one of the reasons I'm no longer pre-med gunner … is because medical applications don't get you jobs.

The uncertainty surrounding elite degree paths, combined with the socioeconomic pressures felt by students, shaped their personal projects and aspirations, impacting their trajectories.

Anna elaborated on the impact of financial responsibility on her experience in her graduate program, detailing,

> [I am] working two to three jobs … versus another student … that's not working, and they're able to provide more publications … and thus receive scholarships. Hence why I'm in my position, hence why I'm working. … It's very merit based. … Because I'm not competitive enough, it's like a cycle. … Every time you wanna progress, you're pushed back a couple steps. … And unfortunately, it's very systematic. For EDI to really go into practice, they need to allocate more money.

David also mentions the challenge of having to academically compete within higher education while supporting oneself, saying "I think … maybe I could have gotten the A plus that the med schools want, instead of an A minus, if I'd locked in harder. But when was I gonna lock in harder?" Fatima corroborates this, expressing "There's not a lot of flexibility in

the expectations for students who were coming from backgrounds that were a little bit more challenging."

While students may be equipped with the knowledge and skills to pursue certain paths, they may not have the freedom, in the form of time and opportunities, as hindered by fiscal responsibilities and commitments which require them to prioritize other projects over those related to their initial academic aspirations. The concept of merit and its role in perpetuating inequity is furthermore explained as students who may have the resources, in terms of academic knowledge, skills, and access to academic materials within the university, may not have the freedom to apply such resources to develop their capability to achieve quantifiable definitions of merit, in the form of grades or publications. The functionings of students in academic contexts yields these measures of merits, which then act as resources for future projects. As understood by students in the study, those who did not have the capability to achieve such functionings initially, due to their impacted resources or freedoms, were placed at further disadvantage down the line. As exhibited by both students in this study and similar studies in international contexts, financial resources and personal responsibilities of the student impacts their choices in higher education (Callender & Melis, 2022; Kutty, 2014; Paulsen & John, 2002; Reay, 2001; Reay et al., 2001).

David furthermore mentioned how the university environment, and the Canadian environment in general, contributed to feelings of othering or identifying with certain labels:

> Nobody's just seeing you as you… If you asked me five years ago [in my home country], 'who are you?' I would be like, '[David]'. … Here, I'm black, I'm male, I'm lower income, like, I'm 'this'. … The societal [labelling] is so much more. It's like when you go outside, 'this' is what they see.

Anna spoke to racialization and its impact on sense of belonging. She revealed,

> It was never easy being in an all-white dominated society, especially in university and undergrad. When you're not [white], in many ways it impacts how you're treated professionally, how you're treated as a student, how you're treated in relationships.

Isabella provided a strong description of her feelings on navigating racism and language barriers as an English-second language student. She stated "It is like a bed of violence,

because they are assessing you for what you say … rather than what you can do. There's a sense of violence underneath everything."

Understanding the manifestations of the systemic barriers students face sheds light on the limitations of the freedoms minoritized students encounter when developing their capabilities within the institution. The challenges students face in their sense of being "othered" within the university impacts their perceived freedom of choice in their individual project-making, thus impacting their agency and perceived ability. The normative and hegemonic social structures which reinforce ongoing social inequity of race and class create an inhospitable environment for minoritized students. A lack of inclusion and equity within such structures severely limits the ability of students to exercise agency in accessing resources and freedoms necessary to developing their capabilities (Unterhalter, 2009; Walker, 2013).

4.2.2 Institutional support and services

The systemic barriers faced by students impacts their access and outcomes within higher education. The gap in resources perpetuated by inequitable social hierarchies is exacerbated through institutional structures. Students coming into university from BIPOC first-generation households often do not have the foundational knowledge of the normative hegemonic culture in Western universities, hidden curriculum of higher education, the systemic operations of the university environment, and the skills and knowledge required to be competitive in academics and employment in neoliberal graduate labour structures (Koutsouris et al., 2021; Orón Semper & Blasco, 2018). Through both generalized student services and targeted EDI initiatives, universities may aim to alleviate some of these burdens and support students in their higher education.

Some students have found certain services to be of good use. Students such as Aisha, Amal, Isabella, and Trevor noted that they received accommodations (supports for eligible students who face limitations or restrictions in their ability to perform in academic settings), including extra time and alternative assignments. These have provided them with the necessary assistance to complete university coursework. Isabella noted that neurodiversity health services provided by the university were integral, since "psychoeducational assessment, if I did it by myself, would have cost me more than $5000, and when I did it at

the [university], it was free." Mackenzie noted that student services aided her, "during my first year they helped me through finding financial resources." Thomas and Trevor both mentioned taking advantage of academic writing supports offered by the university.

However, there were some expressions of discontentment with the available services, as they operate now. Many students stated that they were put-off in accessing guidance or counselling services because of long wait times. Fatima mentioned that inaccessibility was exacerbated due to COVID-19, as "advising became booking an online appointment; booking an in-person appointment became almost impossible." Maryam noted that "with the academic success coach, it was like … he had been trained a certain way … and it didn't feel as natural as this person truly wanting me to succeed … it just didn't seem really personable."

Aisha noted a common occurrence, shared in the experiences of many other participants, where advisors did not provide adequate information:

> I don't know what I'm gonna do with my degree, and they're like, 'I don't know either'. And they would just send me links online, like OK I saw these links already when I was researching. … Some of [the advisors] know what they're doing and some of the others don't … even though it's the same [contact] email. … So it's based on your luck, if you get the ones that know what to do with your degree or the ones that can only help you with course selection.

Some students furthermore related how their personal circumstances and backgrounds were not understood adequately in student service contexts. Maryam explained the following:

> I'm explaining to [the advisor] what went wrong. Like, 'I still live with my family'. … Why would I put myself in debt? And obviously I have some responsibility at home. … 'I'm translating documents, … my dad owns his own business, so I help, … I'm watching [my siblings].' … And the counselor goes 'OK then, you either need to drop out and reapply next semester, or you need to figure out your living situation because … that's not gonna work out for you in university.'

Instances such as this worsened student feelings of hopelessness and isolation within the HE environment. Students felt othered and desolate due to circumstances and personal contexts beyond their control, which were met with harsh responses that lacked cultural understanding or flexibility. Isabella echoed this, stating,

> [Advising] has not worked for me mainly because these people are Caucasian and they're monolingual. … So it's hard for me to connect with them to the point that I stopped going to these places because I'm not getting the actual help that I would like to get. … I get empathy, I guess, but from a different perspective than the empathy and support that I require. … The advice I get, it's not applicable for me.

Isabella further described unfortunate encounters with university provided academic supports, such as writing labs:

> I stopped [going] because at one point I started to felt judged about my abilities. … So I started to have very bad thoughts about myself and it wasn't healthy, so I just stopped. … [The advisors] would grab my paper and just say that it was garbage. … They weren't treating me well.

To compensate for what students perceived they lacked in knowledge or skills, they turned to institutional support services, such as academic advising and subject support centres. However, to be able to adequately recompense for the inequitable social context within which students find themselves, support services must both acknowledge such disparities and furthermore work to remediate these gaps through inclusive, effective, and efficient service. While it is important to provide quality service to students who seek such supports, it is of further import how these services are delivered and how they aim to help students. When services reinforce hegemonic operations of neoliberal structures, these services effectively operate to assimilate students into normative expectations and behaviours, which do not account for diverse experiences, backgrounds, values, and aspirations, and reinforce the continued perpetration of neoliberal hidden curriculum (Koutsouris et al., 2021). Insufficient academic support services may in fact perpetuate harm through the aforementioned feelings of othering within the system, which prevents students from adequately exercising agency and gatekeeps essential resources for their capability development.

4.2.3 Awareness, access, and impact

Students seek transparency in navigating social structures of HE. Awareness of and access to student resources and services determined students' utilization of supports to improve their higher education experience.

Anna highlighted how relevant information and resources are rarely presented in accessible ways to her: “I've noticed in this country, in this culture in general, unless you ask, things are not really pointed out to you.” Emma echoes this point, stating, “If [these supports] were exposed to me proactively … I wouldn't have had to get to the point where I need writing help.” Sheldon further explains that “It's not just about accessibility, but making sure people actually access and have an understanding of why they need to use these resources.”

Many students mentioned exploring third-space resources, accessed via internet and social media platforms. Aisha noted that she “wouldn't have known these different pathways [of study] if it wasn't for TikTok” and used email templates she found on the social media platform. Anna mentioned gaining financial tips, educational resources, and networking advice, also from TikTok. Anna stated that she used the platform “because you have very lovely people who are willing to be great coordinators and guidance counselors, but the people who are actually in those roles are not doing that.”

For students, the ability to exercise agency in seeking resources and support is limited by the contextual knowledge they possess. Without a baseline understanding, they may not know what questions to ask. This is exemplified in how students gain information from social media, where algorithmically curated content essentially becomes a proactive form of knowledge communication. Exposure to such information online gives students a foundation to engage meaningfully with higher education, by helping identify their needs and goals. However, social media carries the risk of spreading false or misleading information, as posts rarely source content (Adelhardt & Eberle, 2024; Chen et al., 2015), which is why institutional approaches are preferable. However, students’ experiences in higher education may leave them feeling isolated and lacking contextual understanding. They experience frustration with institutional support when they are not able to gain comprehensive understanding of how or what they need to undertake to ‘succeed’ in their aspirations. Participants appealed for institutional support that is relevant and empathetic to their circumstances and are furthermore burdened by the need to seek out the support themselves. The lack of resources, in the form of knowledge of how the institution operates and what steps can be taken to acclimatize, impacts the student’s ability to access the appropriate resources which best fit their needs. Proactive approaches to helping students access and understand the value of university support services and initiatives, combined with effective,

egalitarian, and culturally sensitive support, would positively impact student capabilities, as they pertain to the resources at the student's disposal.

Students who have struggled with university and have not been able to adequately access effective support resources reported being negatively impacted by higher education. Maryam stated "the way the university shaped me is it made me feel like a failure. Like it literally made me feel like 'you're not supposed to be here'." Emma furthers this by stating:

> I feel like there's structures that make me feel like I don't belong. … Minority groups not belonging also affects … how you're doing in your academics, which affects how you navigate different social aspects of university.

The above testimonies elucidate the tension between structure and agency, as enduring patterns of social arrangements within the institutions and the normative cultural expectations which shape such hierarchies, work to mould and constrain the behavior of individuals. Agency, as the ability of the student to make independent choices and exert influence over their own circumstances, is thus limited by imposing norms and structures. Deterministic understandings of social circumstances point to how such contexts may shape the individual's perceptions and actions. The behaviour of students is thus shaped by exclusive institutional environments, as they may impose notions of incompetency on minoritized individuals. In restricting the agency of students through such perception, students are unable to exercise the freedom to apply their knowledge and skills to develop their capabilities, impacting their overall functioning within the university (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Sen, 1989).

4.3 Community building and social networks

4.3.1 Social network development

Most participants expressed difficulty coming into university with limited social capital and a small social network. Some participants expressed challenges connecting with peers in their courses, as Amal states, "It's quite isolating and lonely in the program. There's no real cohort that students are a part of." Fatima mentioned, "It's so hard to talk to people because it feels like nobody's really interested. And if you push too hard, then people are gonna be like 'you're trying to use me'."

Some students mentioned the relevance of affinity groups and spaces within the university centered around identities, including first-generation student groups, cultural affinity groups, Black student associations and centres, and cultural centres and spaces for Indigenous students. Amal's experience with her university's first-generation student group was tempered, stating,

> It's nice to be surrounded by other people who … I'm told are having a similar experience, as first in family, but there isn't—I'm looking for a meaningful conversation and meaningful relationships to transpire. And that's just not happening.

Isabella also noted that she was not able to connect with anyone in clubs: "I was in the Latin American club, but these were people that came to Canada when they were like 2 years old, which is—they're still first-generation [immigrants], but it's completely different than my situation."

David, however, emphasized the positive impact of the Black students' centre at his university, and how it fostered a peer network and helped him access targeted resources for support:

> It's a space where they run programs and initiatives, like we have a staff office, a student writing center … all of the [university] official things. It's not like a club, they have a physical space as well, where you can go, be with people you know.

He further elaborates on the importance of this space and other affinity clubs, saying he prioritizes "connecting with people, having that relationship." Trevor furthermore highlighted the Indigenous cultural centre at his university as an important space for him, where he "found a community."

Some students mentioned social media as a third space for social capital development. Aisha described following BIPOC FG content creators on TikTok and engaging with them:

> I feel like it is enough of a substitute, … [the creators] being similar to your culture and your experience of first-generation. … [The content creator] did provide a kind of motivation because it's like, 'look at me, … I didn't have the same opportunities as everyone else, but … I still got here' and she's like, 'I can be your alternative to the connections other people have, I'm here, you can email me'.

Kabir echoed this statement, in how he interacted with posts on Reddit during his preparation to apply for law school:

> You see other people who had similar experiences and … they can tell you what to do and not to do; … it's almost as good as having a friend [in law]. … It's the closest substitute that I could get.

Through student explorations of accessing social support, the importance of this relational context in bolstering student agency is emphasized. Students who are unable to form meaningful connections within the institution felt negatively impacted, whereas students who were able to utilize university spaces to construct effective social networks had a more positive outlook. Furthermore, students who experienced social isolation in navigating higher education turned towards self-described 'substitutes', in the form of social media engagement. This communicates the importance of university support in facilitating student relationships and inclusion, so students do not feel negatively isolated or turn to passive online replacements in place of active social relationships.

Students found some value in peer mentorship, through programs which linked them to upperclassmen. Braydon, however, did comment on the over-involvement of the university in such initiatives, saying "It ends up like a school support, which isn't the same as an upper-year friend. … Like things you would tell your friends, you wouldn't tell your administrators, right?" Emma also participated in a peer mentorship program in first year, and commented that "it's supposed to be helpful, but you also have to chase that person just like you would have to chase the resources," and that she would have much rather preferred a mentor now, in her final years of her degree, since she now knew what questions to ask. This again points to the importance of authentic and accessible social relation to agency, as effective support to bolster student agency and capabilities must be compatible with their needs.

4.3.2 Faculty mentorship & guidance

Gaining social capital through the development of mentor and faculty relationships appeared to be equally as valuable to students as peer relationships, if not more so. Amal mentioned it as a motivating factor for attending her university, so she could "make connections with professors and faculty, to get into research positions." However, some

students, such as Anna and Fatima, found it difficult to establish meaningful ongoing relationships with faculty members. Sheldon expressed, “I wish professors had a more guiding hand towards their students. … It should be considered as standard … not something that one out of 20 professors do.”

Those who were able to connect with professors were very positively impacted by this experience. David spoke highly of Black student mentorship initiatives run through his university’s Black students’ centre and through African-Carribbean faculty groups, where “they connect you with faculty members who have office hours specific to back students” and a program where he met a “mentor who was black and an immigrant, too, and … was the greatest academic support to [him] in first year.” Kabir furthermore spoke of a student-run BIPOC law mentorship program which connected him with BIPOC industry professionals in his field. He expressed that “I met interesting people because of the relationship I had with my mentor last year and him going out his way to help me navigate getting a job and figuring things out.”

Students acknowledged that forming social relationships with faculty and industry connected mentors provided significant resources in the form of knowledge, opportunities, and further connections within academia and professional fields. Pursuing such relationships was highlighted as crucial to progressing towards individual goals and aspirations of academic and career success. Such opportunities for mentorship and guidance furthermore built upon themselves, as the dynamic coevolution of agency and social support allowed students to build knowledge and skills towards establishing further avenues of support and opportunity.

4.3.3 Perceptions of value

Many students expressed implicit understandings of how higher education and graduate labor markets operate, aligning with neoliberal views on the value of social capital and its convertibility into economic opportunities. Students stressed the importance of social networks for employment and future careers. Braydon stated that,

> Half of university is just trying to make connections and socialize, cause you literally can't find a job without one. … Realistically, you can get all 60s, get a really good connection, have like a bit of nepotism, and still get a better job than me.

Sheldon expressed a similar experience and spoke to how he was driven to be very involved in clubs and building his social network for employment purposes, as a first-generation student:

> I've made so many connections that have opened up so many opportunities for me and it's quite unfortunate to think that my life would be so much easier if I went into university already having all of these connections.

Participants additionally expressed how developing connections and community within the university was essential to their sense of belonging within the institution, and how lack of social connections made them feel isolated and unsupported. Some students, such as Anna, expressed the dissonance between their upbringing and the Western dominant culture:

> We live in a very individualistic society … a lot of immigrants have trouble with it, because even though I was born and raised here, our communities … are very communal. … There's a challenge for individuals like myself, trying to integrate.

Building a community within the university tended to allay feelings of isolation. Trevor stated,

> I was afraid, because no one in my life has ever done this before. … But … if people knew that there are people here that will guide you throughout … not only just the professors, but also your colleagues. … Every course I have been in, I've always became good friends at the least two or three people. And for that time in our lives, we're … all helping [each other], and I think that's what I love the most about university. It's the camaraderie.

Understanding the value of social support in higher education is crucial for recognizing its role in providing access to information and resources, offering emotional and practical support, influencing behavior and adaptation, facilitating collaboration and access to hidden opportunities, and building community resilience. Such factors are crucial to the development of student agency and are moreover seen as achievements to strive for, in and of themselves. While strong social support fosters agentic ways of being, such networks furthermore provide resources important for realizing other functionings within the university (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Sen, 1989). Social relationships with peers positively impacts

academic performance, understanding of material, sharing of knowledge and resources, and easing course-related anxieties, thus aiding persistence within a degree program (Mishra, 2020). Strong social networks and participation in student spaces foster a sense of belonging, enhancing academic trajectories (Mishra, 2020). Positive relationships with faculty also increase engagement and academic success, as professors play a key role in creating inclusive conditions that encourage students to build these relationships (Mishra, 2020; Museus, 2011).

Though the capability of building peer relationships and connections with faculty is mediated by students' own interpersonal abilities, they still require the opportunities and avenues of access for navigating social and academic spaces meaningfully. According to students' experiences, university and student-facilitated physical spaces and programming that connect students with peers, counselors, faculty, and industry were conducive to supporting their social functioning and achievement. There is an extensive host of research which examines the value of both social networks and mentorship in different contexts, furthering equity in its positive impacts on student experience, learning, and advancement (Andersen & Watkins, 2018; Grilo et al., 2024; Long, 2018; Mishra, 2020). For students to build social networks with peers and professors, they require resources such as accessible and effective pathways for developing relationships both inside and outside the classroom. This may include mentorship initiatives and dedicated student spaces, ensuring they are not left unable to cultivate these networks or forced to rely solely on online spaces. Furthermore, students should have the freedom to pursue such relationships in open and inclusive environments, both amongst diverse populations and within dedicated spaces for minority representation.

4.4 Overcoming obstacles

4.4.1 Transformation & adaptation within the institution

Every participant in the study reported varying degrees of self-described transformation or adaptation during their higher education journey, including changes in personal outlooks, goals, or skillsets. Many participants described such change because of their experiences within the institution, either from the influence of the supports of the institution or to cope with the systemic barriers faced within the institution. These

experiences are in line with the dialectical nature of agency and social structures, as students may be shaped or constrained in response to their environment (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

Many participants demonstrated resilience and perseverance, despite their self-perception of being at a disadvantage. Aisha emphasized, “It's like, OK, I'm at a disadvantage, but would I rather use that disadvantage to my advantage? And be like, I'm gonna do this because of the experiences I have.” Though some students still expressed hesitance and uncertainty regarding their future within higher education, many felt that through their experience they had gained a broader understanding of success and accomplishment. Song stated, “I feel like education is more like you equip yourself to become a better person. … University is a place where you can transform yourself into another type of person.”

Students' implicit understandings of how their social contexts and the university's structural environment influenced their agentic ways of being are crucial to understanding how they applied their agency. For students to progress towards their goals and create life projects for themselves, both agency and capability must develop in tandem. Students recognize the university as an important space for such development.

Kabir described himself as having undergone a significant, self-motivated transformation during his undergraduate education, which he credited as the foundation for the skills and habits he has utilized to succeed in his graduate law degree. He describes the process:

> I see a lot of people who have a lot of the privileges. … Which is great, they don't have to do what I do. I really have to force myself and … try to find the opportunities I can … because I don't have anybody else to do that for me, … but I also look at it as something to be grateful about, because I got to go out of my way. … I was doing other things too, helping my mom out. … [Though] I can't say ‘pull yourself up by your bootstraps’ to a single mom of three— … I don't want to sound like … I'm acting better than them. Just, in my personal life, … it came down to … [being] rigorous with planning, … being proactive. … Looking back at it, it felt very, very difficult … but I'm happy that I was able to put that investment into myself.

Other participants confirmed these sentiments, acknowledging both the effort required to adapt to the structures and systems in higher education and the pride they felt in their hard work that enabled them to succeed thus far. Kabir's statement emphasizes that, while

individual effort is crucial to success for some, it is not equitable or fair to assume the same is possible for everyone. Some personal circumstances may be more unforgiving, limiting students' ability to exercise the same level of agency, regardless of their motivation or drive.

4.4.2 The importance of effective EDI & support

For students who expressed satisfaction and feelings of success within HE, a large part of their contentment was attributed to the integral role that 'support' had played in their lives. In this context, support encompassed a wide range of services and roles, including student-faculty relationships, peer and industry mentorship, university-facilitated affinity groups and spaces, and university mental health and accessibility services. There was also mention that support begets support: students found that effective spaces, services, and relationships were able to connect them with further useful provisions and novel opportunities, which positively impacted their experience within the university.

Trevor spoke extensively about his personal experiences and how the university and available EDI support and pedagogy have been conducive to his transformation of self and the progress he has made. He has overcome a great deal in his journey to be where he is now: coming from a background marked by colonial pressures and systemic barriers as a First Nations individual living on-reservation, he initially transitioned to university after high school, but soon dropped out. Over the last decade, Trevor has dealt with meth addiction, homelessness, and separation from friends and family; now, he has returned to university, is celebrating two years sober, and wants to give back to the community as an educator. He details the impact the university has had on his personal evolution through its support systems and curricular knowledge:

> I took advantage of [the Indigenous cultural centre], where I found a community, and based on that community I found other resources that were accommodating to me. Having open conversations about my experience, my struggle and academia, I got recommendations to see a learning specialist who got me accommodations. I wouldn't have been able to feel open to share about what was challenging, if it wasn't for these spaces provided at the university. … It wasn't until later in my academic journey where I found the ability … to find connection by opening up, because of the knowledge I was getting in the classrooms. … This university was able to give me the material and the resources and the skillset, … they gave me a push … [that] allowed me to … think critically, but in a sense where I'm not the victim anymore. … The

> programs that I have accessed were the bridges that let me to accept my life for what it is.

For Trevor, returning to university, and having access to the supports and knowledge it provided him, allowed him to feel like he belonged and had a future in higher education. His experience, and the impact of supports on other students, underscores the importance of effective and applicable EDI initiatives which provide relevant support for students.

Student testimonies highlighted the impact of support resources in enhancing their abilities and providing them with the freedom to pursue their capability development within the institution. While students have varying and evolving goals, whether it be academic advancement or personal development and acceptance, student supports have provided crucial pathways for student agency and development in the achievement of their goals. The ability to exercise agency in self-advocacy and self-efficacy is contingent on the freedom students possess (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Klemenčič, 2023). Furthermore, the agentic self-formation of students developed through their personal transformations and overcoming of obstacles is a key function of higher education and as such contributes to success within the institution (Biesta, 2009; Marginson, 2023; Marginson et al., 2023). Students cannot fully develop their agency when faced with insurmountable challenges. Therefore, institutions must provide support avenues that students may lack upon entry to higher education, especially those related to their socioeconomic backgrounds and social networks. Such supports may positively perpetuate ongoing advancement within the institution, as they relate to agency and capability.

4.4.3 Who is supported?

When asked about support, many students who felt relatively unsupported by the institution highlighted the importance of understanding who is supported and in what ways, referencing the contexts and needs of diverse student populations. Anna stated,

> Why is it that a person of colour has ten times more stress because they're working Uber at night … but they’re a Master's, PhD student. … [They] should be well supported. … Unfortunately, nothing can be equal if there's no equity.

There were many instances where participants acknowledged the burden of extra effort resulting from their background, as David states,

> You have to work harder … than everybody else. And then you're judged the same way as everybody whose parents [can support them]. … I wish I could be at the library with [my peers] all day … but at the same time, to finish this degree, I also have to work to pay my tuition, my housing and food.

He further relates this to the compounding effects that these systemic barriers have over time:

> Beyond undergraduate, what happens to us marginalized kids who had to work harder during their bachelor's degree? Like, why don't we deserve Master's? Why don't we deserve PhD's? Why don't we deserve med school?

There is also a perception amongst some students that you must be either excellent or deeply struggling to be noticed and supported within the institution. Song stated that

> [Administration and faculty] treat talents well. … If you study really bad, then the academic advisor will approach you and ask you do you need any help on studies. … I think the average person, it's like they are more likely to be invisible in the group.

Anna shares similar sentiments, asserting, “As a black woman, if you're not excellent, no one looks at you. … No one wants to help you.”

Emma, however, highlights the delicate nature of targeted EDI approaches, which overtly label and place students under scrutiny, and its impact on sense of belonging within the institution:

> It's hard to explain, because on one hand you can see the effort for inclusion, and you feel included in some ways … I've never felt like singled out, but there's also a sense of ‘I must not belong’, because there's so much effort going into explaining why I belong.

Kabir elaborates on the idea of self-perception as a minoritized individual, from a different lens:

> When you're somebody who is so far at the bottom, … we can't have any shame … you have to just keep putting yourself out there. … I see people like, ‘oh, I sent an email to this professor, didn't reply … I'm never gonna talk to him again’ … I

> definitely wanna have that sense of self respect and dignity, but it's like, you're so far down the totem pole right now, if you do, no one's going to give you a chance. You almost have to just … force yourself in the door.

While this approach proved fruitful for Kabir and exemplifies his commendable perseverance, it underscores the unfortunate reality many minoritized individuals face, where they must contend with feelings of inadequacy and devaluation while striving to achieve equal footing with their peers.

Overall, these perspectives highlight the importance of collectivist attitudes which support the common good within the university. As many students both originate from and thrive within collective networks of support, institutions which foster effective inclusive frameworks dually encourage the student in their sense of belonging and academic achievement, thus strengthening the university in delivering equitable higher education (Carson, 2009; Marginson, 2011). Although definitions and perspectives on the specific contributions of higher education to the public good vary widely within the Canadian higher education sector, there is general acknowledgement of the role the university plays in social mobility and equality (Brewis et al., 2024), underlining the need for effective student support and collective networks in HE access and participation. Students highlighted gaps in support, areas where the institution failed to recognize their needs, and feelings of othering and deficit. This further illustrates the critical need for fostering effective support mechanisms. These experiences emphasize the necessity of creating inclusive and equitable environments to ensure that all students benefit from higher education—in doing so, institutions may strive to contribute to the public common good. By addressing student issues, institutions can better support the diverse needs of their student populations and contribute to the overall well-being and success of all students. Such common good is inclusive of students' freedom to effectively pursue their individual goals and values within the institution while being supported in exercising their agency.

4.5 Aspiring toward an equitable university

4.5.1 Current perceptions of the university

Student perceptions of the university and its administrative services and supports generally fell into two broad categories: the neoliberal operation of the university as a business and the ongoing progress and pitfalls of EDI in the institution. Opinions on the impact and effectivity of EDI related initiatives and policies were mixed. While some expressed dissatisfaction with the impact and visibility of inclusion efforts within the university, other students were optimistic and said that the university was making strides in EDI progress. However, all participants agreed that there is still work to be done.

Amal expressed her discontentment with university services from the perspective of herself as a consumer of higher education:

> Why am I paying you so much money for administration? Is it only for doing their paperwork? That's just a point-blank frustration … tuition fees keep going up every year and it's like, why? … I just need to accept that my undergrad is a business model. Give me your money. Here's your degree.

This sentiment was also apparent in students asserting their role as stakeholders in the university and wanting a voice in decision making processes. Braydon stated "I'm paying like 15K to be here. I feel like I should know if the university is going to make a change which impacts me." Anna also felt that "[administrators] are not taking all stakeholders into consideration when it comes to creating policies." Some students furthermore felt sidelined or dehumanized within the system. Braydon elaborated, "I sometimes feel like the university … doesn't treat us like people. They treat us like things that need to be managed."

It is crucial to recognize the role of the student as an important stakeholder within higher education. As students put significant time and financial investments into the university and are highly involved in the day-to-day of the institution, they hold overwhelming stock in the operations and outcomes of higher education. It is of tantamount importance to treat their experiences and perspectives with such importance. As the population putting in the most resources into the university, they hope to gain proportionate benefit from their participation (Marshall, 2018a). It is important to note, "student autonomy

and choice are mediated by larger forces determining what choices are possible or made available by others" (Marshall, 2018a, pp. 81). The role of the institution, then, is to make available adequate support resources to aid student agency and project-making, and to furthermore inform such support through understanding the diverse needs of students. While neither the student nor the institution may control personal or societal forces that impact student capabilities, the university must consider student perspectives in informing the processes by which the institution accommodates and advocates for them. If students perceive that their investment does not reflect the standards to which they hold the university, they will feel further isolated and disillusioned with the institution.

Trevor, having returned to the higher education space after an extended gap, noted that "the amount of space that is being offered to reflect and accept is a much bigger room then it was ten years ago, and I think that's a huge improvement of inclusion and diversity." David however adds that, though there is significant work being done to improve EDI, there is perceived redundancy and the confinement of EDI workshop-style initiatives within an echo-chamber:

> A lot of people who know [about EDI], are those who are doing the work and involved in the work. … If there's a session on it, the people who do the work will be there. … The people I see in the spaces are people I know don't need to be there because they already know what they should know.

Anna expressed that she felt that there was a lack of action or outcome from many initiatives within the university:

> The [Black Lives Matter] movement … kind of pushed people to talk. … You see this room of black individuals who are very emotional. I get it. It's great to have that space, but where was the fruition after? For me, it's not the current feeling, it's the outcome. What am I getting through this?

Kabir furthered this thought, stating his nuanced perspective on EDI efforts, as a proponent of efforts for diverse representation and equitable, ethical practices:

> I don't like when people use [EDI] as a crutch, or a band-aid for a much bigger issue. When things are systemic and they're just gonna throw in EDI, 'oh, we're gonna hire somebody'. … If there's systemic racism that's going on inside the school, … they respond with, 'we're gonna hire an EDI officer and it's gonna fix everything'. That's

> not enough. … If things are a systemic, where things are coming from the top down, what's an EDI officer, at the very bare bones of the faculty, gonna do?

Isabella, who was particularly disillusioned by her experiences, described institutional EDI as "propaganda" and questioned whether rhetoric of BIPOC support was only used for "funding" or institutional "image".

Such perspectives emphasize the core of what students find lacking in institutional equity, diversity, and inclusion. Sara Ahmed (2012) terms this work as "non-performative" diversity, which encompasses institutional efforts that project an image of addressing vital issues of diversity and inclusion, but in practice have little meaningful impact. Such symbolic commitments in policy, rhetoric, and program initiatives merely work to demonstrate commitment without addressing underlying systemic and structural issues which perpetuate inequity. As such, they serve the purpose of maintaining institutional reputation rather than creating effective and substantive change (Ahmed, 2012). This furthermore points to institutions which outline EDI goals as focusing only on diversity (Tamtik & Guenter, 2019) as a 'happy object'. This allows universities to celebrate apparent diversity without acknowledging discrimination and inequity within the space. The disconnect between institutional diversity rhetoric and realities of practice, create a gap in implementation of EDI. Such non-performative speech-acts operate as a scapegoat for institutions to proclaim addressing equity without confronting the change needed within structural conditions which perpetuate inequity (Ahmed, 2012; MacKenzie et al., 2023). Beyond the obvious negative implications of failing to establish equitable and inclusive environments within the university, this lack of genuine action places an additional burden on marginalized groups. The emotional labour of diversity work often falls disproportionately on minoritized individuals, who frequently go unrewarded for their efforts due to the lack of concrete and meaningful action or change (Ahmed, 2012).

4.5.2 Recommendations from lived experience

After discussing their experiences and sharing their personal narratives, participants were asked what they wished the university had done differently to better support them during their higher education journey. Their feedback was derived from their personal experiences and interactions with the institution, as they elaborated on what did and did not

work for them. Student recommendations often overlapped in terms of subject matter and have been compiled as such below.

Fig. 2. Table of student recommendations for an equitable university

Recommendation Area	Breakdown of suggestions relating to EDI support
Institutional Structure	*Kabir:* concrete action to change policies which perpetuate systemic racism and discrimination, instead of non-performative action (like creating figurehead administrative positions) *Kabir, Thomas:* acknowledge intersectional and compounding factors of systemic discrimination and disadvantage *Anna, Braydon:* student stakeholder input in the administration and policies of the university
Awareness & Access of Support Resources	*David, Fatima, Maryam:* strengthening institutional connections within the community, supporting secondary to higher education transitions *Amal:* proactive introduction of support resources, facilitated by voluntary disclosure of relevant personal identifying information *Braydon:* consolidating support resources *Kabir, Sheldon:* communicating the value of support resources to students so they are better motivated to access them *Sheldon:* improved institutional awareness for students on financial systems, academics, industry expectations, and research environments
Academic & Identity Supports	*Aisha:* providing free options for extra-academic engagement (classes or certificates) *Braydon, Fatima:* flexible and forgiving academic policies, which account for different student backgrounds & experiences *Isabella, Song:* more support for ESL students, diverse approaches beyond beginner English supports *Isabella:* university-facilitated multicultural spaces
Academic & Career Counselling Services	*Isabella:* better minority representation in academic advisors *Aisha, Isabella:* better training of advisors (information & cultural awareness), more niche department/degree specific advisors *Emma:* targeted academic & career-related support for minoritized students

Diversity in the Institution	*Aisha:* better minority representation in niche or elite degree paths (e.g. medical school, graduate degrees) *Aisha:* platforming diverse and international voices in academia & research, facilitating exposure to new perspectives *Anna, David, Kabir:* diverse faculty and staff *Song:* support access for underrepresented minority students *Isabella:* fostering racial/ethnic diversity in mental health and LGBTQ+ spaces
Peer Networks	*Amal:* introducing cohorts to build community amongst students *Fatima:* facilitating physical spaces for students to connect with peers *Emma:* latter-year peer mentorship
Mentorship	*Fatima:* programs which connect professors with students for mentorship or learning opportunities *Kabir:* university-facilitated and funded mentorship opportunities, connecting students with both faculty and industry
Platforming Student Voices	*Anna:* include students as contributors in EDI strategy and initiatives *Anna, Braydon:* more research and surveys into student perspectives (conducted & implemented with a sense of urgency) *Fatima:* acknowledging the perspectives of minoritized students
Equity Related Education & Awareness	*Braydon, Fatima:* more effective alternatives to compulsory workshops and training modules *David:* better proliferation of EDI training throughout the university *Fatima:* meaningful integration of Indigenous ways of knowing and awareness of colonial history into pedagogy and curriculum

Understanding the suggestions of students alongside their narratives of their experiences and critiques of the institution provides a comprehensive foundation for insight into where the academy may develop in striving for equitable education. To avoid co-opting neoliberal terminology which seeks to frame student voice as a tool for ensuring customer

satisfaction and perpetuates marketized views of education (Lynch, 2006), it is more appropriate to view student voice and agency as dialectical. This approach fosters open and active discussions that contribute to the ongoing improvement of the university's educational mission. By accounting for diverse perspectives within the institution, shared and competing discourses may be identified as key in developing new approaches and initiatives which seek to support the core educational functions of the university in a manner which reflects student needs (Young & Jerome, 2020). In opening the conversation, students are better able to share their narratives and insights from their own experiences, which can work in tandem with concrete requests from students, to better develop an institutional environment which supports student access to resources and freedoms needed to develop student capabilities.

In organizing the student narratives into the five main themes of this study, an understanding of how students interpret institutional support for achieving meaningful equity, diversity, and inclusion to enhance their capabilities is constructed. By acknowledging the social and material conditions in which minority students are situated before and during their higher education, we can understand how the resources and freedoms shaped by structural contexts impact student agency and capability. How students navigate systemic barriers and foster meaningful relationships within the institution is key to understanding how they may succeed within the university. Their perceptions of institutional structures and efforts for EDI provide clear insight into how students currently view the institution. While students accurately recognize institutional failings in non-performative diversity and the lack of effective implementation of EDI to create equitable structures, they also highlight what does work. Their expectations for the university remain high, as they continue to navigate higher education in the face of persisting systemic barriers. The university maintains a responsibility to these students to establish equitable structures which allow them to freely pursue the development of their capabilities and progress toward their goals.

Chapter 5. Conclusion

5.1 Applications & future directions

This study calls for investigation and action in the areas of concern highlighted by students. As emphasized by participants, there is yet much work to be done in developing the equity, diversity, and inclusion of universities. By coalescing the experiences and implicitly communicated needs of students with their explicitly communicated wants, future policy and programming directions may be gleaned from this research. As communicated throughout this study, improving the systemic operations and environments of the university to better address and reverse embedded discrimination and exclusionary structures is crucial. This foundational effort underpins the entirety of all equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) initiatives.

Ten recommendations for concrete actions within the university, as based on this study, are outlined below:

1. Action deep, institutional change against inequitable systems through meaningful changes in university operations, policies, and structures. All other recommendations are contingent on the willingness for structural change within the university.
2. Create transparency in the hidden processes and understandings of the institution.
3. Foster community partnerships between secondary and higher education to support minoritized student awareness and access.
4. Cultivate the diversity and cultural empathy of the institution through effective and representational university support services and faculty.
5. Proactively communicate the value of and access to relevant support resources for minoritized students.
6. Facilitate university-maintained spaces for minoritized student groups, ensure diversity within general spaces, and support student-run initiatives for peer mentorship and affinity clubs.
7. Promote cultures of mentorship and connection between both students & faculty and students & industry, as facilitated by dedicated mentorship programs.
8. Platform and account for student stakeholder perspectives within administrative decision making and program planning, to be inclusive of diverse needs.

9. Meaningfully integrate EDI and decolonial pedagogy into the general university environment.
10. Interpret dialogue into action within university EDI projects and policies with a sense of urgency, considering the temporality of student experience within the institution.

These recommendations and the additional knowledge obtained from this study may be implemented toward decisive measures to promote meaningful EDI within universities. The study additionally highlights the need for continued investigation into the perspectives and experiences of diverse students within Canadian higher education, as sustained research can be applied to enhance equity and social justice practices.

5.2 Limitations

This qualitative study aimed to provide an overreaching insight into a broad range of students across Canadian public research universities. As a method of participant control, BIPOC FG students were only recruited from U15 universities to standardize the educational environments discussed. However, the final participant pool did not account for all U15 universities nor all demographic backgrounds. As a non-representational study across multiple universities, this research does not epitomize the experiences of all BIPOC FG students, nor do the systems and supports described necessarily account exhaustively for those available at any specific institution. The exploratory nature of the study seeks to provide insight into institutional structures from specific cases, rather than determinately characterize the university system. Furthermore, due to the constraints of the dissertation, unfortunately, not all the perspectives and experiences shared by participants were presented in the findings—the experiences untold are likewise important to furthering institutional development, highlighting the sustained need for open and productive conversations.

5.3 Concluding remarks

In understanding the role of higher education in processes of social mobility and equity in society, it is crucial to understand the experiences of students, to best inform how to support minoritized individuals. Student agency and Sen's capability approach elucidate the

necessary conditions for the development of student capabilities and for achieving functionings that align with the ideal outcomes of the individual. Student perceptions of value and their aspirations are individually shaped by their personal circumstances and socioeconomic positioning, which accounts for the diverse yet broadly shared goals of minoritized students. This furthermore emphasizes the necessity of meeting and exceeding student needs concerning the resources and freedoms available to them. Doing so enables students to freely navigate higher education and exercise their agency in pursuing their individual goals without facing systemic barriers that may impede their development, choices, and achievements. Insight into student narratives and perspectives on how the university may best support their development can better inform institutional directions in striving for equity.

The valuable insights of the fifteen participants in this study highlighted the areas for growth of the institution in supporting the material and immaterial needs of the student and additionally highlighted the positive impacts that such supports may yield when implemented effectively. This study underscores the diversity within student populations and calls for such heterogeneity in the approaches employed to foster equity, diversity, and inclusion in the university. The neoliberal, utilitarian vision of higher education often perpetuates a rhetoric of entry and achievement of the degree by independently overcoming hardship. However, such outlooks ignore the pyrrhic victory of the student—achievement of the HE qualification does not negate the hardship experienced by students in the process. Instead, institutions must commit to the standard of upholding equity-as-fairness approaches in structures and practice to ease student burdens. In remaining accountable to diverse student stakeholder experiences and perspectives, institutions must accordingly support students in developing their agency and capabilities within the university.

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Appendix A: CUREC Application & Approval

Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC)

CUREC 1A Application form for research projects in the social sciences and humanities with less complex ethical issues

The University of Oxford places a high value on the knowledge, expertise, and integrity of its members and their ability to conduct research to high standards of scholarship and ethics. The research ethics review process has been established to ensure that research involving human participants is conducted in a way that respects the dignity, rights, and welfare of participants, and minimises risk to participants, researchers, third parties, and to the University itself. It is assumed that all members of the University will take their responsibilities and obligations seriously, and will ensure that their research involving human participants is conducted according to established principles and good practice in their field and in accordance, where appropriate, with legal requirements.

Before completing this form, please refer to the guidance and flowchart on the Research Support website. Only type-written forms form will be accepted. Completed application forms should be emailed, along with relevant supporting documents, to your Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) or to ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk from your ox.ac.uk email address.

Please contact your DREC or the SSH IDREC if you have any questions about completing this form or the review process.

SECTION A: Filter for CUREC 2 application		
This section determines whether the application for ethics review should be made using this form (CUREC 1A) or the CUREC 2 form (for research with more complex ethical issues).		
Please indicate with an 'X'.	**Yes**	**No**
1. Does the research involve the deception of participants?	☐	☒
2. Are the research participants vulnerable in the context of the research, or classed as people whose ability to give free and informed consent is in question? For example, • Participants aged 16 or under (also answer question A5); • Participants aged 16 – 18 who can neither be considered competent youths nor recruited under Approved Procedure 25 • adults at risk; Note the University's Safeguarding Guidance and Code of Practice and its implications for researchers involving young people or adults at risk.	☐	☒
3. By taking part in the research, will participants be at risk of criminal prosecution or significant harm?	☐	☒

4. Does your research raise issues relevant to the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act (the Prevent Duty), which seeks to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism? Best Practice Guidance 07 on the Prevent Duty provides further guidance.	☐	☒
If you answered **'No'** to all the questions above, go to Section B. If you answered **'Yes'** to any question above, continue to question 5 below.		
5. Is your project covered by a CUREC Approved Procedure?	☐	☒
If yes, list the CUREC Approved Procedure(s) you will follow		
If you have answered '**No**' to all questions 1-4, go on to **Section B**. If you answered '**Yes**' to ANY of questions 1-4, and answered '**No**' to question 5, **stop** completing this form and do not submit it for ethical review. You will instead need to submit a CUREC 2 application form. If you answered '**Yes**' to **any** of questions 1-4, and your project is covered by an Approved Procedure, **go on to Section B**. If more than one Approved Procedure applies, contact the SSH IDREC or your DREC for advice on whether a CUREC 2 form should be submitted instead.		

SECTION B: Researchers		
1. Name of Principal Investigator or student's supervisor	James Robson	
2. Department or Institute	Department of Education	
3. University of Oxford email address	james.robson@education.ox.ac.uk	
Copy and paste the following six rows as necessary to complete for each additional researcher who will be involved in this study, including student(s) and those external to the University.		
4. Name of researcher or student	Nawreen Hena	
5. Department or Institute	Department of Education	
6. University of Oxford email address	nawreen.hena@stcatz.ox.ac.uk	
7. Role in research	Student	
8. Degree programme, if student research	MSc Education (Higher Education)	
The whole research team		
9. Have the researchers undertaken research ethics and integrity training?	**Yes** ☒	**No** ☐
10. Please provide details of any research ethics and integrity training undertaken, including the dates of the training. Alternatively state relevant research experience.	Completed "Research Integrity: Introductory Core Course" University of Oxford e-Learning course on 23 Jan 2024. Previous undergraduate research experience from 2017 to 2022 at the University of Alberta.	
11. State any conflicts of interest and explain how these will be addressed.	None	

SECTION C: The research project	
1. Title of the research project	
Toward Inclusive Excellence: Insights from BIPOC First-Generation Students on Institutional Support and Equity Practices in Canadian Higher Education	
2. Anticipated start date of the aspect of the research project involving human participants and/ or personal data (**dd/mm/yy**).	01/03/24 As soon as ethics approval is attained
3. Anticipated research end date (**dd/mm/yy**).	30/09/24
4. Provide a brief lay summary of the aims and objectives of the research. This should cover the questions it will answer and any potential benefits. (max 300 words)	

In Canadian higher education (HE), both BIPOC (visible minorities and Indigenous) students and first-generation (FG) students, whose parents/guardians lack university education, encounter significant challenges within the higher education landscape. Students within the intersecting BIPOC FG group face compounding multifaceted challenges in achieving higher education. Higher education institutions (HEIs) in Canada attempt to promote equitable educational environments and diversity through Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion policies and initiatives; however, critical literature has outlined the limitations of institutional policy frameworks and practices. This study aims to answer the questions:

1. How do students with intersecting identities of “BIPOC” and “first-generation” view success, personal growth, and their overall experiences within the higher education institution, particularly in terms of assessing the support they perceive from the institution?
2. Do BIPOC first-generation students feel that EDI policies, resources, programs, and initiatives have played a role in shaping their academic success and personal growth or are there areas where they feel unsupported by the institution? How can these insights inform future enhancements to institutional policies and support mechanisms?

By using Sen’s capability approach, achievement and development are defined by participants, and allows each participant to relay their unique HE experiences, interpretations of EDI, and whether institutional EDI practices were salient in their achievement of personally described measures of success. This inquiry into student perspectives aims to identify any gaps or disconnect which may arise between institutional understandings and goals of EDI and the lived experiences of marginalized students. Students from U15 institutions, the collaborative research universities group, are targeted to provide a diverse representation of the leading institutions in Canada, which model practices in the rest of the sector.

To the best of the author’s knowledge, this is the first study to interrogate the salience of institutional practice in BIPOC FG student experiences in Canadian HE. Although this research will be a non-generalizable standard qualitative interview study, it aims to provide the groundwork for holistic and nuanced approaches to EDI policy and initiatives in Canadian HEIs, as a pathway for institutional practice to better meet the needs of students. Reframing policy goals and practice with consideration of the lived experiences of marginalized students plays an important role in moving away from shallow interpretations of EDI which promote tokenism and performative action, and towards meaningful impact in the lives of students.

5. Please indicate the methods to be used (indicate with an '**X**'):	
Analysis of existing records	☐
Snowball sampling (recruiting through contacts of existing participants)	☐
Use of casual or local workers e.g. interpreters (refer to guidance in BPG 01: Researcher safety)	☐
Participant observation	☐
Covert observation	☐
Observation of specific organisational practices	☐
Participant completes questionnaire in hard copy	☐
Participant completes online questionnaire or other online task (refer to guidance in BPG 06: Internet-mediated research)	☒
Using social media to recruit or interact with participants (refer to guidance in BPG 06: Internet-mediated research)	☒
Participant performs paper and pencil task	☐
Participant performs verbal or aural task (e.g. for linguistic study)	☐
Focus group	☐
Interview (refer to guidance in BPG 10: Conducting research interviews)	☒
Audio recording of participant (you will generally need specific consent from participants for this)	☒
Video recording of participant (you will generally need specific consent from participants for this)	☐
Photography of participant (you will generally need specific consent from participants for this)	☐
Others (please specify below)	☐

6. Provide a brief summary of the research design and methods. What will research participants be asked to do? (max 300 words)
   Please also submit a copy of the questions participants will be asked, if applicable, or some information about the sorts of topics that will be covered.

This study employs a qualitative interview-based approach to understand the experiences of BIPOC first-generation students within Canadian higher education institutions. The research aims to understand the nuances of student experiences through qualitative semi-structured hour-long interviews, focusing on their perceptions of success & personal growth, institutional support, and the impact of equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives. The selection of participants aims to encompass a diverse range of institutional experiences, including representation from each of the fifteen target institutions, those within the U15 group, which is comprised of the widely recognized research-intensive universities in Canada. The study aims to provide valuable insights into the complexities of navigating higher education for BIPOC first-generation students and to contribute to discussions surrounding institutional support and enhancement strategies by thematically coding and analyzing participant interview responses.

The initial call for participants will be sent out using advertising materials, including posters and flyers, to university faculty, student groups, through social media, and word of mouth. This call for participants will link to an applicant interest form, which will confirm basic demographic information relevant to the study, to identify participants who meet the criteria for study. This form will be hosted through Microsoft Forms University of Oxford Nexus365, and all results will be stored securely on the researcher's University of Oxford OneDrive account.

The study aims to recruit 15 to 20 participants who meet the following criteria

- Student enrolled in a four-year undergraduate program at a Canadian U15 institution;
- In their penultimate or final year of study;
- Visible minority* or Indigenous**
    - *This label is used by the Canadian census and institutional EDI disclosures – it is the official Canadian terminology used to refer to racialized (non-white) individuals in Canada; **Indigenous is defined by the Canadian census as both Treaty and self-identifying First Nation, Metis, and Inuit peoples
- First-generation student (parent/guardian education level is lower than four-year bachelor's degree)

Any persons with a personal relationship to the researcher will be excluded. If there is more interest than participant spots, applicants will be chosen randomly from those who submitted the interest form. Applicants will be divided based on the fifteen target institutions and then 1-2 participants will be chosen from each institution. Applicants will be assigned a number and then chosen via the Google random number generator tool.

Participants will be asked to sit for a semi-structured interview, which will be conducted and recorded online via University of Oxford Microsoft Teams. In this interview, students will be asked to reflect on their university experience, their student identity, their understanding of EDI, and their assessment of the impact the institution has had on their achievement. Specific questions attached. Student responses will be transcribed and thematically coded for analysis. All participants will be pseudonymized, with identifying information omitted from data reporting. All data will be stored securely on university servers.

7. List the location(s) where the research will be conducted, including any other countries.	United Kingdom (remote, researcher) Canada (remote, participants)		
8. Clarify which parts of the research will be conducted in-person and which will take place remotely, e.g. online.	All participant interaction and research will be conducted remotely/online		
9. If your research involves fieldwork or travel and your department requires a travel risk assessment, will you have completed and returned a risk assessment form beforehand? Please indicate with an '**X**'. (This must be approved by your department before you travel. If you are travelling overseas, you are advised to take out University travel insurance.) Refer to guidance available from your Department, the Safety Office, the Social Sciences Division, and the Humanities Division, and on travel for University business.		Yes	☐
		No	☐
		Not required in this instance	☒
10. In the case of international or collaborative research, explain how you will address any ethical issues specific to the local context. Please provide details of the local review, approval or			

permission obtained or required. Refer to the BPG 16: Social science research conducted outside the UK and the Code of Conduct for Ethical Fieldwork. If there will be no local review, explain why not. Please mention any stakeholder or community engagement that has been/ will be undertaken in relation to the research. Please also address any physical or psychological risks for Oxford researchers and local fieldworkers in Section G.
Research will be conducted with Canadian participants; as such, Canadian Tri-Council research ethics guidelines have been consulted and taken into consideration when developing the research. Research furthermore falls within the parameters set by BPG 16: Social science research conducted outside the UK and the Code of Conduct for Ethical Fieldwork. There will be no stakeholder or community engagement involved in the research process outside of participant recruitment. There are no physical or psychological risks associated with this research.

11. Name of departmental/ peer reviewer (if applicable)	N/A
12. External organisation funding the research and grant reference (if applicable)	N/A
13. Please refer to the CUREC Best Practice Guidance and list any that have been used to develop your research.	Canadian Tri-Council research ethics guidelines, BPG 10 Conducting research interviews, BPG 16 Social science research conducted outside the UK, and Ethical Fieldwork Code of Conduct.

SECTION D: Recruitment of research participants	
1. Number of participants	Approx. 15 to 20 participants
2. How was the number of participants decided?	This was decided to be the appropriate number of interviewees to conduct a qualitative interview study within the constraints of a dissertation, with a diverse representation of students from across Canadian U15 institutions.
3. Age range of participants	18 and over
4. Inclusion criteria	Student enrolled in a four-year undergraduate program at a Canadian U15 institution; In their penultimate or final year of study; Visible minority or Indigenous (as defined by Canadian Census); First-generation student (parent/guardian education level is lower than four-year bachelor's degree)
5. Exclusion criteria	Participants will be chosen from those who submit interest form and meet qualifications for study; those who submit the application but do not meet inclusion criteria will be excluded. Any persons with a personal relationship to the

	researcher will be excluded. If there is more interest than participant spots, applicants will be chosen randomly from those who submitted the interest form. Random selection will be done with consideration of even spread of participants; applicants will be divided based on the fifteen target institutions and then 1-2 participants will be chosen from each institution. Applicants will be assigned a number and then chosen via the Google random number generator tool.	
6. Indicate with an '**X**' all intended recruitment methods **Please submit copies of the recruitment material that will be used, e.g. advertisement text, introductory email text.**	Poster advert	☒
	Flyer	☒
	Email circulation	☒
	Social media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook)	☒
	Website	☐
	In-person approach	☐
	Snowball sampling	☐
	Recruitment sites (e.g. Mechanical Turk)	☐
	Existing contacts or volunteer database	☒
	Other (please specify): Contacting university administration and student groups to have them disseminate recruitment information	☒
7. How will potential participants be identified and approached?	There will be an open call for participants disseminated through university administration, student groups, existing organizational and student contacts, and social media, using emails, posters, and flyers to send out link to sign-up form. Sign-up form for participant recruitment will include basic demographic questions which will be used to identify if they may be included in the study.	
8. Will informed consent be obtained from the research participants or their parents/ guardians? If not, please explain why not.	Yes; informed consent obtained from adult participants.	

9. For each activity or group of participants, explain how informed consent will be obtained from the participants themselves and/ or their parents/ guardians, if applicable. How will their consent be recorded? **Please submit copies of all participant-facing materials for review.** E.g.: • Recruitment material (e.g. emails, posters) • Information for participants to read (or hear) before they agree to take part (e.g. written information or, if applicable, an outline oral information script). • A document to record informed consent. Further guidance and templates.	Initial informed consent will be included in the sign-up form for participant recruitment, which will provide information on the purpose of the study and details on how personal information will be stored. Those selected for the study will be provided with a second informed consent disclosure via email prior to the interview, which will include technical aspects of participant involvement in the and a reminder of the purposes of the study. All the signed consent forms will be kept by the researcher until the end of the research period, on University of Oxford OneDrive server.
10. Provide details of any payments and incentives and the rationale for providing these. Further guidance in Best Practice Guidance: 05 Payments and incentives in research.	None
11. Describe how participants • may withdraw from the study • may withdraw any personal information they have provided from the study State any limits to withdrawal, for example once the data has been anonymised or at some other specified stage prior to publication. Make sure participants are aware of any withdrawal limits.	Participants may withdraw from the study up until June 1, 2024. Participants will need to notify the researcher if they wish to withdraw; this information will be detailed in the participant information form. The personal information of all participants and potential participants who withdraw will have their information deleted. If the participant or potential wishes to withdraw a portion of their information, including data obtained from interviews, they may inform the researcher until June 1, 2024. Personal contact information of participant applicants will be retained until the completion of the project, September 30, 2024, unless otherwise requested. Applicants may choose to withdraw their application at any point, upon which their personal information will be deleted.

SECTION E: Research data

All information provided by participants is considered research data for the purpose of this form. Any research data from which participants can be identified is known as personal data; any personal data which is sensitive is considered special category data. Management of personal data, either directly or via a third party, must comply with the requirements of the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018, as set out in the University's Guidance on Data Protection and Research.

In answering the questions below, please also consider the points raised in the Data Protection Checklist and Data Protection Screening Assessment and whether, for higher-risk data processing, a separate Data Protection Impact Assessment may also be required for the research. Advice on research data management and security is available from Research Data Oxford and your local IT department. Advice on data protection is available from the Information Compliance team.

For guidance on conducting internet-mediated research, refer to CUREC's Best Practice Guidance 06: Internet-mediated research.

1. What data will be collected? (Indicate with an '**X**')

Screening documents	☒	Task results (e.g. questionnaires, diaries)	☐
Consent records (e.g., written consent forms, audio-recorded consent, assent forms)	☒	IP addresses (refer to Best Practice Guidance 09: Data collection, protection and management for guidance)	☐
Contact details for the purpose of this research only	☒	Field notes	☐
Contact details for future use (guidance)	☐	Photographs	☐
Opt-out forms	☐	Information about the health of the participant (including mental health)	☐
Audio recordings	☒	Previously collected (secondary) data	☐
Video recordings	☐	Data already in the public domain. Specify the source of the data:	☐
Transcript of audio/ video recordings	☒	Other, please specify:	☐

2. During the course of the research, where will **each type of** research data be stored?	All data and information will be stored on University of Oxford hosted Nexus365 applications, including OneDrive and Sharepoint. Participant Selection Form will be hosted through Microsoft Forms University of Oxford Nexus365, and all results will be stored securely on the researcher's University of Oxford OneDrive account. All communication with participants will be conducted via University of Oxford official Outlook email. All consent forms will be sent and received through the researcher's University of Oxford official Outlook email. Signed consent forms will be stored on OneDrive.

	All interviews will be conducted virtually via Teams. With consent from participants, interviews will be recorded; the audio will be separated from the video and video recording will be deleted. Audio recordings will be stored on OneDrive. Transcriptions of these interviews will also be stored on OneDrive. All online data transfers and communication will be conducted via University of Oxford secure eduroam WiFi.		
3. Who will have access to the research data during the project?	Access to the research and research data will be limited to the researcher and the supervisor. Participants will be informed in the consent form about who has access to the research, ensuring full awareness.		
4. Please complete this section if your research involves the use of secondary (i.e. previously collected) data.	**Please indicated with an 'X'.**	**Yes**	**No**
	Are data access agreements in place for access to and use of this secondary data? (If so, please attach these.)	☐	☐
	Did the individuals agree that their data could be used for this purpose?	☐	☐
	Could anyone (including members of the research team) link the data back to an individual or individuals? If this is a possibility, please explain how the associated ethical issues will be addressed:	☐	☐
5. How do you intend to share the research data at the end of the project?	Depositing in a specialist data centre or archive	☐	
	Submitting to a journal to support a publication	☐	
	Depositing in an institutional repository	☐	
	Dissemination via a project or institutional website	☐	
	No plans to share the data	☒	
	Other (please specify):	☐	
6. How do you intend to report and disseminate the results of the research? (Indicate with an 'X')	Thesis publication	☒	
	Publication in a peer reviewed journal	☒	
	Publicly available report	☒	
	Conference presentation	☒	
	Publication on a website	☒	
	Pre-registration	☐	
	Report to a research funder	☐	
	Providing participants with a lay summary of the results	☐	
	Submission for academic assessment	☒	

	Other (please specify):	☐

7. Explain what will happen to the data at the end of the research project. This question must be answered for each type of data, including completed consent forms.
The research data will be securely stored within university servers for the next three years, with a secure transfer of data via SharePoint to the research supervisor upon the conclusion of the project, considering the researcher's departure from the institution. After the three-year period, all research data will be permanently deleted to uphold data security and confidentiality.

SECTION F: Protection of research participants and their personal data

1. How identifiable will the participants be from the **research outputs**? (Indicate with an 'X')	Directly identifiable from the information included	☐
	Pseudonymised/ indirectly identifiable	☒
	Not identifiable – data is anonymous	☐
	Other, please specify:	☐
2. To what extent will the **data** be de-identified? How identifiable will any individuals be from the research data? Describe any measures you will take towards assuring confidentiality, potential risks to confidentiality.	All participants will be assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. Only with explicit consent from the participant will their race, parental education, and educational institution enrolment be included in the reported data. Participants who opt not to provide specific information in these categories will be anonymized using general labels such as BIPOC, first-generation student, and enrolled in a U15 institution. All other identifying data, including references to individuals or stakeholders beyond the study's scope, names, and non-university organizations, will be removed or anonymized to safeguard privacy and adhere to ethical standards. Participants may request to keep any specific information shared throughout the research process confidential.	
3. How will you ensure that third parties (e.g., interpreters and transcribers) are aware of and adhere to the measures described in this form?	N/A, no third-party involvement.	

SECTION G: Risks and benefits of the research

1. Will the research involve topics that could be considered sensitive? If so:
    a. Please provide more detail or supporting information (such as the interview questions) to show the range of questions;
    b. Explain what steps will be taken to reduce risk of distress;

c. Consider seeking advice from within your Department or from the ethics committee including whether the application might benefit from additional ethics review (e.g., via a CUREC 2 application).

The research will involve topics which may be considered sensitive. The focus of the study involves students reflecting on their experiences throughout higher education, including any challenges related to their identity. Topics such as race, cultural sensitivity, and potentially class and family background may be sensitive for some students. However, appropriate caution and care will be exercised when addressing these subjects in interviews. All participants will be informed of the study aims and interview topics prior to obtaining consent through participant information sheets, so individuals will be prepared for interview content. Consent forms will include an acknowledgment of the discussion of potentially sensitive topics, including race and family background.

Participants will be assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality, and their consent will be sought before including specific information such as race, parental education, gender, and educational institution enrolment in the reported data. Those who prefer not to provide specific information in these categories will be anonymized using general labels such as BIPOC, first-generation student, and enrolled in a U15 institution. This approach aims to respect participants' privacy and comfort levels.

The study involves a series of carefully designed questions, covering various aspects related to the participants' experiences in higher education. These questions are intended to foster rapport, establish the capability framework, explore intersectional identity and equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), delve into capability development, and encourage reflections on EDI within the institution. Throughout the interviews, participants will not be pressured to share more than they are comfortable with, and the purpose of the study will be clearly communicated in advance.

If any topics emerge as sensitive during the interviews, steps will be taken to reduce distress and omitted from participant data collection. Additionally, the ethical implications of the research will be continuously considered, and advice may be sought from within the department or the ethics committee, including the possibility of additional ethics review if deemed necessary.

2. Describe any additional burden or risks to the participants or others, including the potential for any indirect negative consequences. Explain the steps you will take to address these.

There are no other anticipated burdens or risks for participants.

3. Describe any physical or psychological risks to the researcher(s) (including local fieldworkers or research assistants) and the steps you will take to address these.

There are no anticipated physical or psychological risks.

4. Describe any benefits of the research, both to participants and to others.
Outline the processes put in place to enable equitable research (see BPG 16 Social science research conducted outside the UK for further guidance).

The research holds benefits for both participants and the broader academic community. Participants will have the opportunity to reflect on their experiences within the institution, fostering a sense of introspection and potentially experiencing catharsis. By sharing their narratives, students may gain a deeper understanding of their personal growth and success, contributing to a heightened sense of achievement.
Moreover, this reflective process could extend beyond individual benefits. Participants may find that their increased understanding of capabilities and success, potentially influenced by institutional support, not only enhances their personal development but also proves beneficial within their social and familial networks. For those pursuing postgraduate education, these reflections may serve as a foundation for continued growth and success.
Furthermore, this study provides a contribution to the field. While conducted as a non-generalizable qualitative interview study, its aim is to establish a foundation for holistic and nuanced approaches to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) policy and initiatives in Canadian higher education institutions (HEIs). By delving into the lived experiences of marginalized students, the research strives to guide institutional practices, fostering a departure from superficial interpretations of EDI that promote tokenism. Instead, it seeks to pave the way for meaningful impacts in the lives of students, reshaping policy goals and practices to be rooted in lived experience to better meet the diverse needs of the student body.

5. Comment on the societal impact.

This research is crucial in the pursuit of equity within increasingly stratified higher education institutions. As higher education serves as a nexus for social mobility and capital, understanding and addressing the challenges faced by marginalized students is increasingly important. The findings may not only inform institutional policies but also contribute to the broader goal of fostering equitable practices within educational settings. Recognizing the significance of equitable education, not only as a means of personal advancement but as a driver of a more inclusive society, underscores the societal importance of this research.

6. Give details of any other ethical issues or relevant information.

N/A

SECTION H: Professional guidelines

Please indicate with an '**X**' at least one set of professional guidelines you will follow.

Research specialism/ methodology	**Association and guidance**	
Anthropology	Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK	☐
Computer Science	ACM Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct	☐
Criminology	British Society of Criminology Statement of Ethics	☐
Education	British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research	☒
Geography	American Association of Geographers Statement on Professional Ethics	☐
History	Oral History Society of the UK Ethical Guidelines	☐
Internet-mediated research	Association of Internet Researchers Ethical Guidelines	☐

	British Psychological Society: Ethics Guidelines for internet-mediated research Association for Computing Machinery Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct	
Management	Academy of Management Code of Ethics	☐
Political Science	American Political Science Association (APSA) Guide to Professional Ethics in Political Science	☐
Politics	Political Studies Association. Guidelines for Good Professional Conduct	☐
Psychology	British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct	☐
Social research	Social Research Association: Ethical Guidelines	☐
Socio-legal studies	Socio-Legal Studies Association: Statement of Principles of Ethical Research Practice	☐
Sociology	The British Sociological Association: Statement of Ethical Practice	☐
Visual research	ESRC National Centre for Research Methods Review Paper: Visual Ethics: Ethical Issues in Visual Research	☐
Other professional guidelines		☐

SECTION I: Endorsements and signatures

Please ensure this form is endorsed by the Principal Investigator (or student's supervisor), the Head of Department (or nominee) and, if student research, by the student themselves.
The SSH IDREC Secretariat accepts either option below. If you have a DREC, check which signature option it prefers.

- **Option 1: direct email endorsements**
  Each of the signatories should submit an email from a University of Oxford email address, indicating their acceptance of the responsibilities listed below.
- **Option 2: signatures**
  Please scan the signed form and email it to us as a PDF. Pasted images of signatures cannot be accepted.

Endorsement by the Principal Investigator/ student supervisor and student, if applicable

I/ we the researchers understand my/ our responsibilities as Principal Investigator (and student, if applicable) as outlined in the guidance on the CUREC website. I/ we declare that the answers above accurately describe the research as presently designed, and that the ethics committee will be informed of any changes to the project which affect the answers to this form.
I/ we will inform the relevant IDREC if the Principal Investigator changes.

Name of Principal Investigator	James Robson
Principal Investigator's signature	
Date	5/2/2024

Name of student (if applicable)	Nawreen Hena
Student's signature	
Date	5/2/2024

Departmental endorsement – from the Head of Department or nominee (Another senior member of the department may sign where the head of department is the Principal Investigator, or where the Head of Department has appointed a nominee. Example nominees include Deputy Head of Department, Director of Research, or Director of Graduate/ Undergraduate Studies.)	
On the basis of the information available to me, I confirm that: • I am aware of the research proposed and have read this application; • To the best of my knowledge, the proposed design and scientific methodology do not raise ethical concerns; • I support this research in principle, subject to ethical and other necessary reviews.	
Signature	Instead of a signature, endorsement may be provided by an email confirming the points above.
Name	
Role	
Date	

SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES
INTERDIVISIONAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE
DEPARTMENTAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Department of Education
15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY
student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk; staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk



Nawreen Hena
Department of Education, Social Sciences Division
University of Oxford

23 February 2024

Dear Nawreen Hena,

Research ethics approval

Research title: Toward Inclusive Excellence: Insights from BIPOC First-Generation Students on Institutional Support and Equity Practices in Canadian Higher Education

Research ethics reference: EDUC_C1A_24_035

The above application has been considered on behalf of the Education Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) in accordance with the University's procedures for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to confirm that, on the basis of the information provided to the DREC, ethics approval has now been granted for this study.

Please note the following:

Personal data: It is the responsibility of the PI to ensure that all personal data collected during the project is managed in accordance with the University's guidance and legal requirements.

In-person activities: Any data collection involving in-person interactions with participants must have an up-to-date fieldwork risk assessment in place; further guidance is available from the Safety Office's website.

Amendments: Please notify the committee if you intend to make any amendments to the information in your ethics application as submitted at date of this approval, as all changes must receive ethical approval prior to implementation. The amendment form is available on the SSH IDREC webpage.

We welcome feedback on your experience of the ethical review process and suggestions for improvement. Please email any comments to staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk / student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk or ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk.

Yours sincerely

Xin Xu

DREC member

cc: James Robson (as Supervisor)

Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet

Department of Education
University of Oxford, 15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX26PY
James Robson
james.robson@education.ox.ac.uk
Nawreen Hena, MSc Student
nawreen.hena@stcatz.ox.ac.uk

Toward Inclusive Excellence: Insights from BIPOC First-Generation Students on Institutional Support and Equity Practices in Canadian Higher Education

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Central University Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference: [**EDUC_C1A_24_035**]

Introductory paragraph

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Feel free to ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

Why is this research being conducted?

This research is prompted by the recognition of the unique experiences of BIPOC and first-generation students in Canadian higher education. The study aims to understand the lived experiences of BIPOC first-generation students and explore the relationship between their personal narratives and academic journeys and the role of Canadian universities.

This research aims to explore the perspectives and experiences of BIPOC first-generation students in higher education, with a specific focus on their life stories, including their perceptions of identity, personal growth, and overall experiences within the institution. The study seeks to understand the extent to which these students feel supported by the educational institution. By addressing these questions, the research aims to provide valuable insights from the life experiences of students, contributing to a more inclusive and supportive higher education environment for BIPOC first-generation students.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited to participate in the study because you meet the specific criteria that align with the research objectives. The study aims to recruit 15 to 20 participants who:

- Are students above the age of 18, enrolled in full time study at a Canadian U15 institution.

- Identify as a visible minority or Indigenous (as defined by Canadian Census).
- Are first-generation students, meaning their parent/guardian's education level is lower than a four-year university bachelor's degree.

Exclusion criteria include any persons with a personal relationship to the researcher.

In the event of more interest than available participant spots, applicants will be randomly chosen from those who submitted the interest form. The selection process will involve dividing applicants based on the fifteen target institutions, with 1-2 participants chosen from each institution. Applicants will be assigned a number and selected using the Google random number generator tool.

Do I have to take part?

No. It is up to you to decide whether to take part. You can withdraw yourself from the research, without giving a reason, by advising me of this decision. The deadline by which you can withdraw any information you have contributed to the research is **June 1, 2024 [01/06/24]**. The personal information of all participants and potential participants who withdraw will have their information deleted. If you wish to withdraw a portion of your information, including sections of data obtained from interviews, they may inform me until June 1, 2024.

What will happen to me if I take part in the research?

Here is what to expect if you participate in the study:

- You will be asked to consent to providing your contact details and eligibility for participation in the study via a secure online form, prior to becoming a participant of the study.
- The entirety of the study will be conducted remotely, through secure email communication and secure Teams virtual meetings. There is no anticipated in-person research in the scope of this study.
- Prior to your involvement in this study, you will be asked to provide consent to participate in the study through the completion of a signed consent form, communicated via email.
- Your personal time contribution to this project, outside of communication, is expected to be an approximately **hour-long** interview, conducted virtually.
- This interview will cover the following areas of discussion and potential questions:
    - Questions about your field of study and personal goals in higher education.
    - Exploration of how your identity, especially as a BIPOC first-gen student, shapes your experience.
    - Reflection on personal growth, challenges, and influential factors in your academic journey.
    - Discussion on resources, programs, or initiatives that contributed significantly to your success.
    - Looking back, how the university supported your development, and any desired changes in policies or resources.
- Please be mindful that the following topics may arise in discussion, which may be **sensitive**:
    - Topics of race and/or ethnic background
    - Topics of family (parents or guardian) background

- This project will conclude September 30, 2024. Within this time, you will only be expected to participate in a single interview, scheduled within March to April, at your convenience. However, if there is any information which requires clarification, you may be contacted via email before the end of the project.
- With your consent, I would like to record the audio of the virtual interview, to have an accurate record of our conversation.
- During the interview, you can ask to pause or stop the research activities at any time. You may also strike or withdraw information from the record. You may withdraw from the study at any point up to June 1, 2024.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks in taking part?

Participating in this study holds no expected disadvantages or risks. To ensure confidentiality, all participants will receive pseudonyms (fake names). Explicit consent is required for inclusion of race, parental education, and educational institution details in the reported data. Those opting not to provide specific information will be labelled generically. Anonymization measures will be applied to protect privacy, including the removal or anonymization of all irrelevant identifying data. Participants may request to keep specific information confidential, ensuring their comfort and privacy throughout the research process.

Are there any benefits in taking part?

Participating in this research is a valuable opportunity for personal reflection, potentially leading to a deeper understanding of your growth and success within the institution. Your insights may extend beyond individual benefits, positively influencing your social networks. For those considering post-graduate education, this reflective process can serve as a foundation for continued personal development.

Moreover, your participation contributes to the academic community by providing insights into the practices of Canadian higher education institutions. While the study is non-generalizable, it aims to guide institutional practices by exploring the lived experiences of marginalized students. Your contribution can help reshape policies and practices, fostering a more inclusive and supportive educational environment for students.

What information will be collected and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research objectives?

The information collected for this research will centre around your experiences as an undergraduate student of BIPOC first-generation background in a Canadian university. This data is crucial to understanding potential gaps or disconnects between institutional EDI goals and the realities of students' needs and life experiences.

Types of Data and Usage:

- Participant Selection Form Data: Hosted on University of Oxford Nexus365 applications, including OneDrive and Sharepoint, this form collects demographic and eligibility information to ensure participants meet the criteria. Results will be securely stored on the researcher’s University of Oxford OneDrive account.

- Communication Data: All communication will be conducted via University of Oxford official Outlook email to ensure security and confidentiality.
- Consent Forms: Sent and received through the researcher's University of Oxford official Outlook email, signed consent forms will be stored securely on OneDrive.
- Interview Data: Virtual interviews via Teams will be conducted with participants. With their consent, interviews will be recorded; audio recording will be separated from the video, and video recordings will be deleted. The final audio recordings will be securely stored on OneDrive. Transcriptions will also be stored on OneDrive.

Data Storage and Duration:

- Location: All data and information will be stored on University of Oxford hosted Nexus365 applications, including OneDrive and Sharepoint.
- Security Measures: These platforms provide robust security measures to safeguard the data.
- Duration: Personal contact information of participant applicants will be retained until the completion of the project, August 30, 2024, unless otherwise requested. Identifiable data, including consent forms, will be stored securely for three-years after the completion of the research. After the three-year period, all research data will be permanently deleted to uphold data security and confidentiality.

Will the research be published? Could I be identified from any publications or other research outputs?

The findings from the research will be written up for my master's dissertation. A copy of my dissertation will be deposited both in print and online in the Oxford University Research Archive, where it will be publicly available to facilitate its use in future research.

There is potential for this research to be further shared through academic publication in a peer-reviewed journal, as a conference presentation, as a publicly available report, or a publication on a website.

Participants will not be able to be directly identifiable from any research outputs. To ensure confidentiality, all participants will receive pseudonyms (fake names). Explicit consent is required for inclusion of race, parental education, educational institution details, and quotations used (without identifying information) in the reported data. Those opting not to provide specific information will be labelled generically. Anonymization measures will be applied to protect privacy, including the removal or anonymization of all irrelevant identifying data. Participants may request to keep specific information confidential, ensuring their comfort and privacy throughout the research process.

Data Protection

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the research. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that is performed in the public interest. Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from the University's Information Compliance web site at https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights.

Who has reviewed this research?

This research has received ethics approval from a subcommittee of the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee. (Ethics reference: **EDUC_C1A_24_035)**.

Who do I contact if I have a concern about the research or I wish to complain?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this research, please contact Nawreen Hena at nawreen.hena@stcatz.ox.ac.uk or James Robson at james.robson@education.ox.ac.uk, and we will do our best to answer your query. We will acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how it will be dealt with. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford who will seek to resolve the matter as soon as possible:

The Chair, Education Departmental Research Ethics Committee;
Email: staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk / student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk (as applicable)
Department of Education
University of Oxford, 15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY

Further Information and Contact Details

If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact:

Nawreen Hena
Department of Education
University of Oxford, 15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX26PY
University email: nawreen.hena@stcatz.ox.ac.uk

Appendix C: Participant Consent Form



Department of Education

University of Oxford, 15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX26PY

James Robson; <james.robson@education.ox.ac.uk>
Nawreen Hena, MSc Student; <nawreen.hena@stcatz.ox.ac.uk>

CONSENT FORM

Study Title: *Toward Inclusive Excellence: Insights from BIPOC First-Generation Students on Institutional Support and Equity Practices in Canadian Higher Education*

Name of Researcher: Nawreen Hena *If you agree, please initial box*

1. I confirm that I have read the information sheet dated _____ for this study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions, and have these answered satisfactorily.	
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw until June 1, 2024 [01/06/24] without giving any reason.	
3. I understand who will have access to the personal data provided, how the data will be stored, and what will happen to the data at the end of the project, as identified in the information sheet.	
4. I understand that I will be pseudonymized (given a fake name) in any research outputs.	
5. I consent to my racial/ethnic identity being identified alongside my pseudonym.	
6. I consent to my parent/guardians educational background being identified alongside my pseudonym.	
7. I consent to the university I am enrolled in being identified alongside my pseudonym.	

8. I give permission to be quoted (under a pseudonym, with no identifying information) in data reporting.	
9. I agree to the interview being audio recorded, to retain an accurate record of the interview for research purposes.	
10. I give permission to be contacted within the study period, until September 30, 2024, if any further clarification of information is needed.	
11. I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint, as outlined in the information sheet.	
12. I agree to take part in this study.	

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	*Date*	*Signature*
_____	_____	_____
Name of Person taking Consent	*Date*	*Signature*

Appendix D: Interview Topics

1. **Identity**
    - Race/ethnicity
    - First-generation
    - Relationship between identity and experience
2. **Experiences**
    - Classes / academics
        i. Degree path
        ii. Student academic support services
        iii. Faculty
    - Advisors / counselling services
    - Clubs / extracurriculars / volunteering
        i. Peer / friend groups (social network and connections)
    - What kind of practices do you associate with university provided support
    - How do you find different opportunities / things to get involved with
3. **Success**
    - How do you define success
    - Have you built your abilities
4. **Trajectory**
    - Sense of self
    - Understanding the world
    - Comparing transition to university versus now
    - Setting up for achievement of future goals
    - University support
    - Perception of university's outlook on EDI
    - If you could give the university input, what would you change / done better?