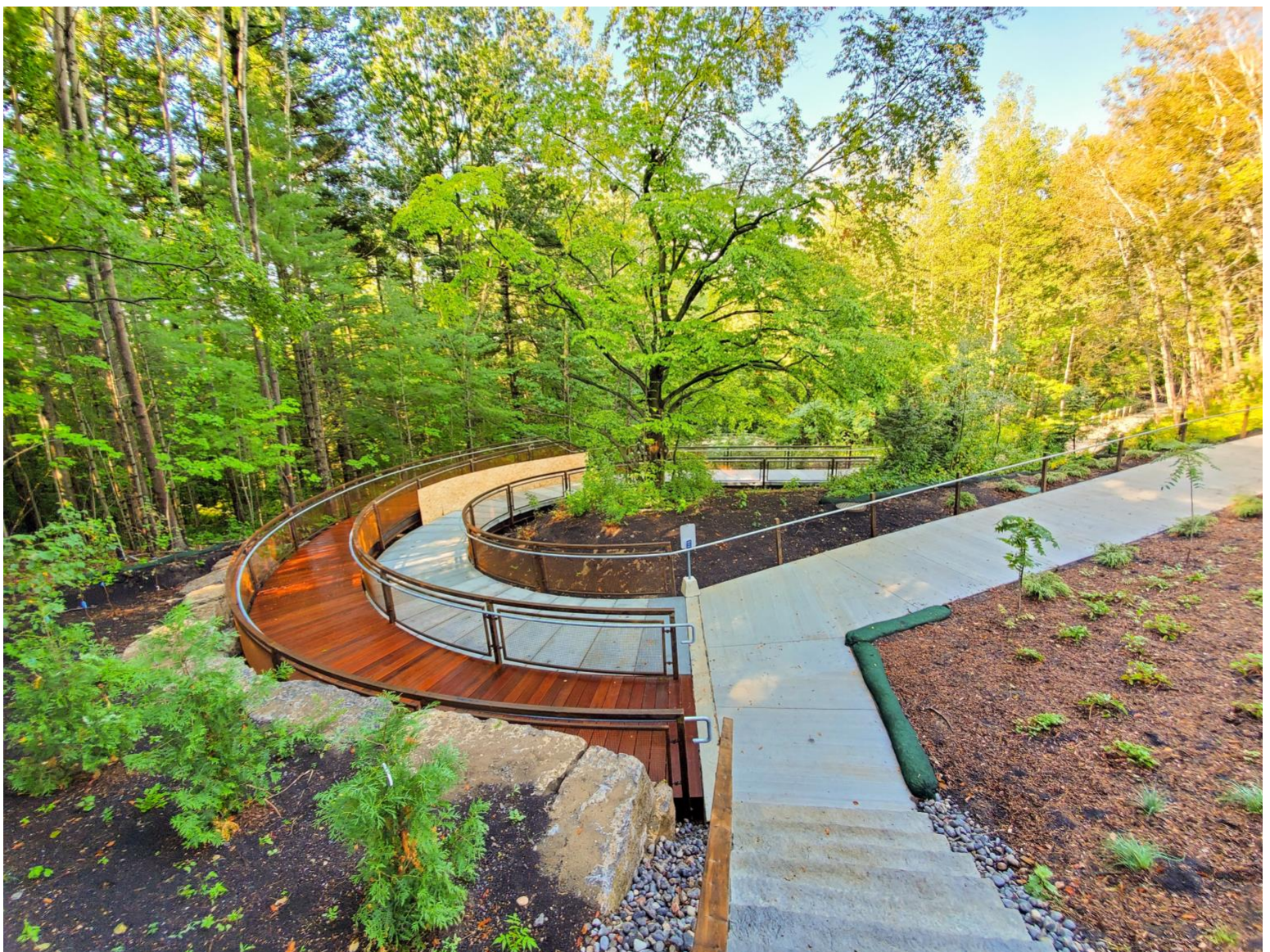


# National Dialogues and Action for Inclusive Higher Education and Communities:

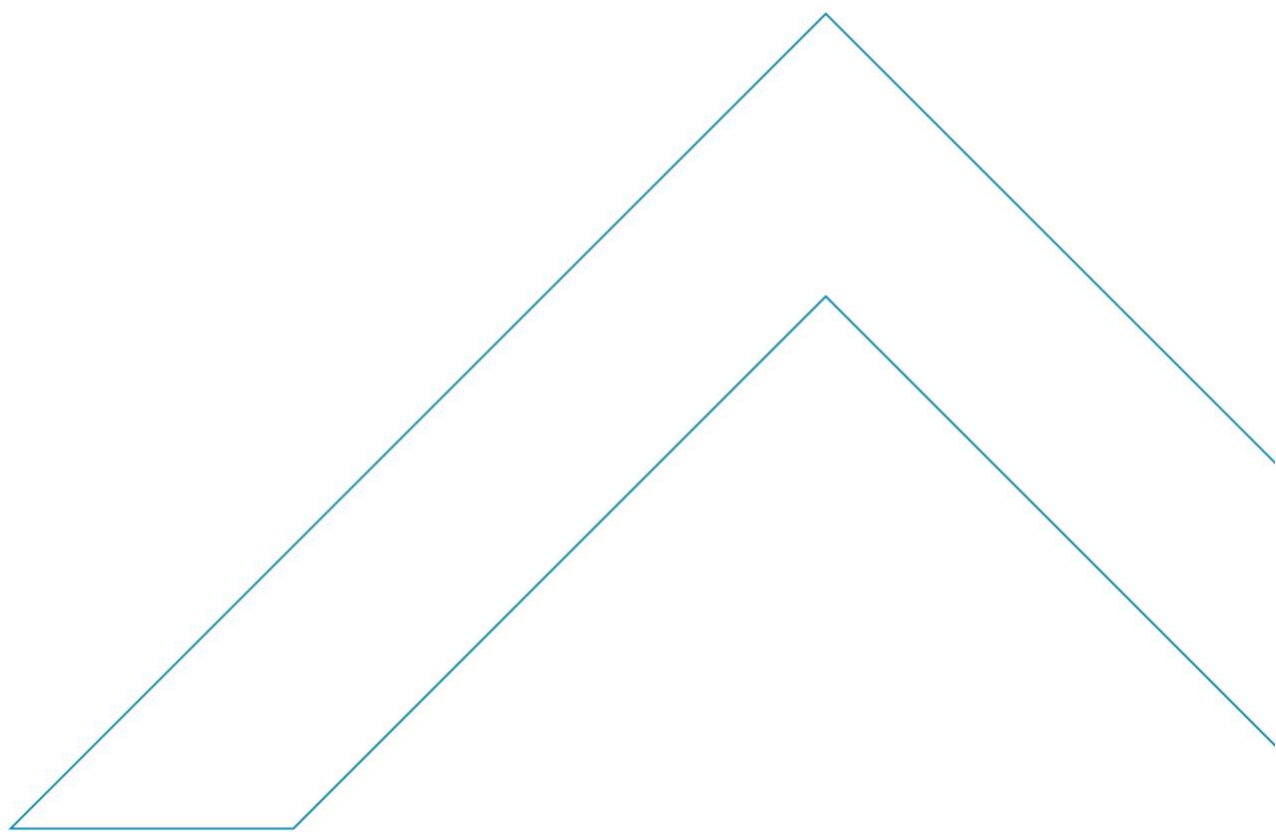
Addressing Ableism, Disability, and Accessibility in Canadian Higher Education

2022 Report



UNIVERSITY OF  
**TORONTO**  
SCARBOROUGH

DEFY  
GRAVITY



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University of Toronto Scarborough 1265 Military Trail, Toronto, ON, M1C 1A4, Canada







This report is dedicated to the memory of our friend and colleague David Onley.

It is difficult to put into words the legacy David left behind. Some of us remember him as one of the first Canadian on-air TV personalities with a visible disability, or the first lieutenant-governor of Ontario with a visible disability.

To those of us at U of T Scarborough, we also knew him as a warm and welcoming personality who always made time for students and colleagues.

Throughout his life, David remained a passionate advocate for disability rights and accessibility. In his 2018 review of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, he wrote a scathing report that the province was failing people with disabilities and was nowhere near its goal of achieving full accessibility.

David's accomplishments in working towards a more inclusive and accessible world are too long to list, but we also want to acknowledge his contribution as a member of the planning committee for the second National Dialogues.

We hope these conversations can, in some small way, help continue his legacy.

—2022 National Dialogues and Action Planning Committee



## Preamble

The National Dialogues and Action are a series of national forums focused on addressing equity and inclusion in Canadian post-secondary education. This initiative provides a platform for a series of biennial gatherings. The goal is to connect participants from across the Canadian higher education landscape as well as subject matter experts to discuss and to take collective action that promotes equity and inclusion within the sector and beyond to the wider community.

The theme for this year's dialogues was ***Addressing Ableism, Disability and Accessibility***. The planning committee was intentional in ensuring that a diversity of backgrounds, lived experiences, perspectives and intersectional identities (racial, ethnic, gender, religious identity, or linguistic preference) were represented on individual panels and across all the sessions. To constitute these broadly representative panels, the committee reached out to a diverse group of knowledgeable individuals and experts living with various forms of disability, as well as others with relevant expertise.

While some were unable to join us because of various commitments, and not every form of disability or experience was represented on each panel, we are grateful that we were able to assemble an excellent group of panelists. They and the undoubtedly representative community of participants enriched our understanding of barriers to learning and working in the post-secondary education sector for persons with disabilities. The wealth of in-depth discussions and ideas generated through the dialogues in the highly interactive sessions provided viable pathways for addressing critical issues facing students, faculty and staff.

This report offers a synthesis of the deliberations, drawing on the remarks by panelists and interventions by participants who shared a wide range of personal and professional expertise and experiences to address the issues, challenges, impact, and implications of the relevant sub-theme for each session.

We hope that the body of knowledge captured in the report, which was made possible by the 2022 National Dialogues' commitment to co-creating solutions, gives readers some guidance for action to stem ableism and facilitate inclusion for members of our community living with a disability. It is the expectation of participants that we will all do our part to build on the ideas generated and take the necessary actions to create and sustain a conducive environment for students, faculty and staff with disabilities to fully access and participate in the life of their institutions, to flourish, and to feel a meaningful sense of belonging.

**Wisdom Tettey, Convenor**

Vice-President, University of Toronto and Principal, University of Toronto  
Scarborough

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# Welcome remarks by National Dialogues host Meric Gertler, President, University of Toronto

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We wish to acknowledge this land on which the University of Toronto operates. For thousands of years, it has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit. Today, this meeting place is still home to many Indigenous People from across Turtle Island, and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.

The National Dialogues series is a collaborative effort on the part of universities and colleges across Canada. It is a powerful source of positive social change as we have already seen through the launch of the *Scarborough Charter on Anti-Black Racism and Black Inclusion*. It's so wonderful that colleagues from so many member organizations take part in this year's gathering.

This topic is of the greatest importance. There is strong consensus among Canada's universities and colleges that in order to fulfill our educational mission we must embrace the full diversity of human experiences and perspectives. To that end, post-secondary institutions across Canada as well as the umbrella organizations representing our sector have integrated accessibility into their policies on equity, diversity, and inclusion. Those policies reflect our country's human rights codes and related legislation, which address persons with disabilities alongside women, Indigenous people, and members of racialized communities as well as other equity-deserving groups.

Accessibility is therefore one of our core shared values as scholars, teachers, administrators and as Canadians. It is a priority, not an afterthought, and it must be intentional and comprehensive. We've made considerable progress in the last couple of years. We can point to the work being done by the Accessibility Institute at Carleton University, the programs in Disability Studies at Bow Valley College, and the program in Disability and Citizenship Rights at Université du Québec à Montréal, the first of its kind in the Francophonie. Also, the Spatializing Care Lab at the St. Francis Xavier University, and our own Centre for Global Disability Studies at the University of Toronto Scarborough, to name just a few examples.

There are many other accessibility initiatives at your own institutes, but we need to redouble our efforts. Universities Canada, of which I am currently the chair, instituted a survey of EDI policies and practices at our member institutions in 2019. The results have helped provide the data we need for benchmarking, capacity-building and information sharing. They show a strong widespread commitment to accessibility across our sector, but they also confirm that a lot more remains to be done to fully meet that commitment. The survey was conducted again in 2022 and the results will be published soon.



As we emerged from the pandemic, our institutions are re-thinking how we use space as we reflect on the experience of working from home and respond to the increased demand for hybrid work arrangements. We are also re-thinking how we integrate digital technologies into our teaching and learning. As we ponder these questions, we have a tremendous opportunity to consider how to advance accessibility in the classroom and the workplace.

We can use this process to accelerate the integration of universal design principles into our planning so that our teaching, learning and work environments, both in-person and virtual, will be increasingly accessible to all.

I want to thank all of you for your contributions in addressing ableism and accessibility in our institutions. Your expertise, passion and commitment are making a difference for the better. I would also like to thank the organizers of today's gathering and colleagues across the country for actively engaging in the National Dialogues process.





# Remarks by Kelly Hannah-Moffat, Vice-President, People Strategy, Equity and Culture



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The theme for this year's UN International Day for People's with Disabilities was transformative solutions for inclusive development: the role of innovation in fueling an accessible and equitable world. Under this theme, the UN encourages global conversations about how to remove barriers in both public and private sectors for those with lived experiences of disability.

It also encourages conversations about what innovations can support full access to employment in a rapidly changing world of work. Hosting these types of conversations is exactly what we want to do with these sessions. It's exciting to have panelists from post-secondary institutions across Canada from the public and private sectors and more than 1,000 registrants.

We are here to embrace diverse perspectives, to confront current practices and assumptions, and as institutions co-create solutions with people who have lived experiences of disability. I want to thank all of the participants. Thank you for recognizing the urgency of what we are here to do, to ensure all members of our respective communities can participate fully in the activities and aspirations that define our institutions.

We will emerge from these dialogues with concrete strategies and ideas to apply to our own contexts, and we will as the UN suggests, work towards transformative solutions for inclusion and design our spaces, systems, language, and attitudes in ways that are accessible to all.

Inclusion is a necessary mindset. Without it we are not honouring the very reason post-secondary institutions exist, which is to nurture the success of all those who learn and work here. Nurturing this success involves creating an institutional culture that integrates principles of accessibility and belonging, and ensuring this culture engages and supports those with a lived experience of disability.

When every member of our community experiences a sense of belonging, they can do their very best work, be their most creative and make their greatest contributions. Our learning, working and research environments can in turn be enriched by a wide range of lived experiences and ideas and that is when an institution can achieve excellence. By taking part in these dialogues all of us are making a commitment to achieving that goal.

# 1. Ableism and the Canadian Academy: Interrogating the Culture and Systems of Exclusion

The first session started by defining what ableism means and how it exists in various forms in Canadian post-secondary education. The panelists explored how ableism manifests in post-secondary institutions both historically and in the present, the social costs of ableism, and how students, faculty and staff experience ableism in the classroom and on campus. The panelists also discussed the difference between accessibility and accommodation and the need to expand access across the sector.



## Setting the Context: Definition and practice of ableism in Canadian higher education

At its core, ableism is a system of oppression that privileges non-disabled people. It is discrimination against people with disabilities based on the idea that non-disabled bodies are superior. Ableism assumes that people with disabilities need to be “fixed” and defines people by their disability. It is a belief system, similar in respects to racism, sexism and ageism, that sees persons with disabilities as being less worthy of respect and consideration, less able to contribute and participate, or of less inherent value than others.

Ableism may be conscious or unconscious, and is embedded in the institutions, systems and the attitudes of society.

The panelists explored the idea of structural ableism. Structural ableism permeates an institution’s practices and procedures. It is present in an institution’s culture and attitudes that have been normalized over time. One characteristic of structural ableism is the notion that barriers are an individual issue that a student, faculty or staff member must overcome on their own, usually through an accommodation. In other words, the burden is on the person with a

disability to “fit in” an institution. Disabled people are framed as a burden on the institution and their diverse needs are typically framed as individual medical challenges. Instead, institutions must change to remove exclusionary barriers and provide access as a core part of equity, diversity and inclusion work. Raising awareness might not be enough — it will require action to dismantle these systemic barriers built into our institutions.

Post-secondary institutions, like most social institutions, have historically excluded disabled people through ableist policies, practices and infrastructure. Often policies that seek to improve inclusion don't go far enough. For example, the framework of “accommodation” (as described in legal obligations to provide reasonable accommodation) still suggests that providing a barrier-free environment is a burden. As a result, ableism remains pervasive and normalized in post-secondary settings.

One challenge is that ableism is baked into curricula. In many university programs, especially in health-related subjects, it is common to approach disability as something abnormal that must be fixed or eliminated rather than a normal part of human experience. Consider the experience of students with a disability who hear from their instructors that they need to be “fixed” or rehabilitated.

While it is important to recognize progress in addressing ableism, the reality is there continues to be significant barriers to access and inclusion in Canadian institutions of higher learning. As a result, our institutions risk losing these talented faculty and students, pushed out by ableism.

## **Critique of accommodation and disclosure practices**

Panelists emphasized the importance of distinguishing between accommodation and universal design. Broadly speaking, accommodation is a reactive attempt to include those who make requests for support with appropriate documentation. In contrast, a universal design approach to accessibility seeks to design courses and physical spaces to provide an inclusive environment for all such that individual requests to remove barriers are minimized.

For example, an accommodation might involve developing tests or assignments that have more flexible time requirements for students with visual or learning disabilities to take a test. Accessibility might involve developing course materials that do not rely on tests with time requirements. A universal design approach reduces ableism because it takes the burden off the student, faculty or staff member who finds the environment disabling.

Accommodations have long been held up as a solution, but quite often they are an attempt to retrofit something that is not working in the first place. Accommodations can lead to misconceptions. For example, there is a false idea that student access needs are a form of extra



help that offer an unfair advantage. In reality, many students end up not seeking accommodations they need because of stigma, administrative barriers and shame.

Further complicating matters is that practices and policies differ across the post-secondary sector; an experience of accommodation at one school might be completely different at another.

One major barrier in receiving an accommodation is that students, faculty and staff are required to provide medical proof of their disability status. This kind of disclosure is an invasion of personal privacy. Acquiring the paperwork to demonstrate disability status can also be an onerous and time-consuming process.

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*“What if we allocated all of the energy we spend on adapting to an old educational regime based on timing and testing into building a new one in which disabled students don’t always need to ask for accommodations but instead their needs are expected. One in which no disabled student or faculty member is treated like a surprise.”– Jay Dolmage*

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## Faculty

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## Students

Students encounter institutional ableism from their first day on campus. Their first interaction with an instructor often entails disclosing their disability status because they need to seek an in-class accommodation. Students are forced to do this task repeatedly, and because there remains a stigma associated with disability, it is unreasonable to expect students to keep doing this because it is an onerous process and they may be made to feel like a burden. Some students feel like going to a health or accessibility services office dehumanizes them by medicalizing their disability. The result is that students will not seek an accommodation.

Research shows that 24 per cent of Canadian university students self-declare as having a disability, but only six to nine per cent seek an accommodation. This means that far fewer students who could benefit from an accommodation are actually seeking one. The result is that fewer students with disabilities are finishing their degrees. While 27 per cent of Canadians have university degrees, only 17.6 per cent of Canadians with disabilities have one. To address this disparity, the post-secondary sector needs to do more to prevent students with disabilities from leaving school before finishing their education.

Students with disabilities who come to university or college do so with a history of disenfranchisement. Accommodations should not be approached as a “workload” problem for staff. The panelists agreed that students should not have to constantly show documentation or request accommodations for accessibility. There are also inequities built into accessing accommodations because assessments can cost time and money. The idea of “anticipatory duty,” which requires an institution to consider various accessibility requirements in advance so courses can be fully inclusive, was raised as a potential solution. Overwork may also be contributing to access fatigue since accessibility is left to individual faculty and students rather than being a system-wide consideration.

## Graduate students

Graduate students are in a unique situation because they take courses and work as teaching assistants or instructors. They must navigate two separate institutional systems — accessibility services for students and human resources for academic staff. This doubles the burden of

requesting an accommodation. Campuses should streamline policies to allow these two institutional offices to communicate directly regarding graduate student accommodations.

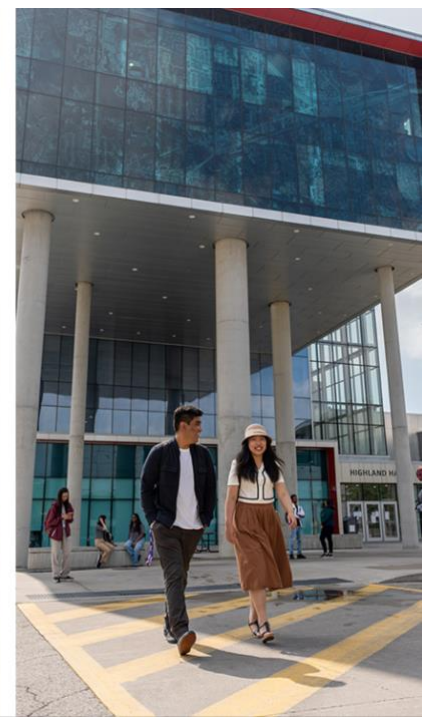
Graduate students with disabilities also benefit from mentoring and peer support to help navigate institutional systems and stigma, because they may fear disclosing accessibility needs to faculty who are both their instructors and their supervisors.

Not all graduate students are able to pursue full-time study, as a disability can impact work capacity and pace, yet most graduate programs only fund full-time students. Administrators can improve opportunities for disabled scholars by creating options for funding of part-time study for graduate students with disabilities.

Graduate students with a disability should not be treated as a surprise when they arrive in labs or departments. Labs and departments must be prepared to support accessibility needs for incoming graduate students. Departments can prepare by doing an accessibility audit to ensure they are ready to support students of all abilities. For example, labs and classrooms should be made wheelchair accessible, handwashing stations or lecterns should be made accessible from a seated position and departmental events should have closed captioning. Faculty and staff may need software in place for incoming students and may need to be trained to use it. Institutions must also have clear policies in place so departments can request one-time funds to improve accessibility or provide access for public events.

Lastly, when it comes to creating policies and naming student support offices, the panelists said that university and college administration should not shy away from the term *disability*.

Disability is often replaced by euphemisms such as “special needs,” “lived experience of health-seeking” or “body diversity.” This can be positive since not all students are comfortable assuming a specific identity, but when disability is not articulated clearly, students with a disability can disappear. “People with disabilities” and “disabled people” are both widely accepted terms today.





## 2. Inclusive Curriculum and Learning Design, Work Facilitation, and Research Supports

The second session looked at ways of moving away from teaching and research environments where people with disabilities seek individual accommodations to one with classrooms and research environments that are already anti-ableist and inclusive. The panelists explored intentional inclusion, universal design principles, the potential limitations of universal design, the problem of “access fatigue,” and some ways institutions can create more inclusive and accessible teaching, learning and research environments.



### Limitations to the current accommodations model

One panelist noted that the current system of accommodations perpetuates a deficit model in its approach to students with disabilities. It judges students with disabilities as missing something and as requiring an intervention to access a mainstream design. Making students get documentation for an accommodation can be a depersonalizing practice.

The current accommodations model also creates a lack of responsibility and accountability from faculty to support students with disabilities, also known as a culture of referral. When an issue arises with access, it is often referred to someone with expertise in accessibility. Rather than train teachers to teach inclusively, the default is to rely on someone else to “deal” with accessibility.

Another panelist argued that accessibility services budgets, under an individual accommodations model, are, in many ways, unsustainable. Funds are currently allocated to address individual access needs without addressing system-wide change. More money needs to be put into training and opportunities for faculty to think about ways they can change teaching methods to be more inclusive. Faculty also need material supports and incentives to do this work. Overwhelming numbers of individual student access needs are — in the absence of system-wide institutional supports — contributing to faculty burnout.

## The promises and challenges of universal design for learning

Universal design for learning (UDL) is an educational framework that strives to create accessible, welcoming and inclusive learning environments for all learners, including students with disabilities or those with other learning needs. It is inclusive design that engages with people authentically by considering unique cultural, social and other needs that extend beyond those of so-called “typical” users. An example of a UDL practice includes providing information in multiple formats such as text, images, videos or audio recordings. Another is providing closed captions, transcripts or audio descriptions of multimedia content.

Incorporating universal design into courses is not without its challenges. Faculty may need to adapt their approaches to UDL when there is an unanticipated learner that requires something new or different. On many campuses, universal design implementation is left up to an individual or a small committee. Accessible teaching and learning requires creativity and additional labour.

UDL can be challenging to implement, particularly when the responsibility of making courses accessible falls on individuals, for example a course instructor. One panelist shared examples of a practice known as collective access as a way of inviting students and faculty to share in the work of accessibility and universal design. Some campuses have large student populations and being able to manage and implement universal design across all courses will be a daunting challenge. Post-secondary institutions are often large, fragmented and bureaucratic. There is very little research showing how to guide campuses through change.

Finally, it can be said that universal design works until it doesn't, meaning that it does not completely eliminate the need for individualized accommodation. So in this way, it is not truly “universal.” Post-secondary institutions need to do more to welcome those with unanticipated access needs.

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*“We spend an awful lot of money on accommodations, with no view of changing the way we teach and learn.” – Frederic Fovet*

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### 3. Inclusive Infrastructure Design and Planning: From Technology Systems and the Built Environment to Procurement

The third session looked at a range of services related to technological and physical environments. It focused on accessible digital technology, current and emerging trends in digital technology and the built environment, and how these create barriers to full participation among students, faculty and staff. The panelists also explored the importance of developing and adopting accessible procurement policies, to ensure institutions are creating working and learning infrastructure and spaces that are accessible.



#### Accessibility challenges in technological environments

The use of technology can make learning more accessible and flexible. Assistive Technology (AT) are tools and devices used by persons with disabilities to access information and perform tasks independently.

There are plenty of examples of mainstream technology and software that has built-in accessibility features so they are not an add on or specialized technology. This includes those found in Office 365, Adobe Acrobat Pro, audiobooks, electronic publications and mobile technologies. In recent years there has been an increase in the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in general use technologies that help with accessibility. These include video captioning, captions for Teams and Zoom, text-to-speech and voice prediction in Office 365, voice for search engines in Google, control of computers using voice commands, Google search adapted to use cameras on smartphones and AI-based psychological support apps.



However, technological barriers continue to exist for the post-secondary sector, including data analysis software and peer-reviewed journal databases that are inaccessible, especially for students in science, technology, engineering and math. AT software and hardware continue to be expensive. Additionally, academic evaluations can create barriers (such as timed tests), there continues to be inaccessible documents and course materials prepared by faculty, and French language software is often out of date.

There have also been developments in virtual and augmented reality, but how well they will work for students with disabilities is still unknown. Telecollaboration, where students can take virtual field trips to real world locations, are becoming more common. Smart glasses have heads up displays that show data and respond to voice commands, while they will soon be sign language compatible. Smart gloves are improving to help with sign language. There is also potential for students with disabilities to use robots to run experiments. While all of these technologies are in various stages of development and adoption, there is potential to assist students, faculty and staff with disabilities. The important thing to consider is whether these technologies are being developed with the guidance and input of people with disabilities.

Technology tools such as accessibility checkers (such as in Office 365) are good at catching certain inaccessible practices, including errors to alternative text or image descriptions. They are not good at catching screen magnification or screen colour and contrast errors. Also, accessibility and usability are not the same. Existing systems are often developed by the non-disabled community and often rely on automation for accessibility testing. This creates technology that will pass an accessibility test but fail a usability test by someone in the disability community. Survey platforms are a good example; if they are not vetted for accessibility, they will miss feedback from users with disabilities.

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*“What we’ve learned in terms of accessibility within our own institutions is that real change towards inclusion still requires more voices from people who are currently excluded.” – Kate Clark*

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French software also often lags English software, particularly on accessibility features. This is because these features are often developed in the US, not Canada. Another problem is that students with disabilities, especially those with visual impairments, can get textbooks (albeit often late into the semester) but must buy their own reference materials because they require an accessible version. This can be very expensive.

There continues to be adaptive technologies that make assumptions about users (such as text-to-speech technology that only uses white male voices). There have been issues in properly training AI for facial recognition of Black and racialized people, or self-driving cars that fail to recognize people using wheelchairs as they cross the road. The reason often comes down to a lack of diversity in the staff developing these systems. It is therefore important that people of all

backgrounds and abilities are involved in training AI systems. It is also the reason why the perspectives of people from different genders, races, ages and abilities are important in developing an accessible procurement policy.

## **Accessibility barriers and planning gaps in the built environment**

Barriers to the physical environment also continue to exist. Many campuses have buildings that are a few hundred years old. These were built at times when the users were white, non-disabled men and are not inclusive of the diverse community of people who use post-secondary institutions today. Buildings are still not equipped for mobility devices such as wheelchairs. This means students, staff and faculty still cannot enter buildings, classrooms, washrooms, floors or paths between buildings. Building design must also be designed for those with mobility, sensory and learning disabilities.

There tends to be a gap in accessibility scholarship, planning and practice. Best practices are more common in health fields, particularly a focus on physical disability through occupational therapy, as well as engineering and architectural fields. These fields often address accessibility through individual buildings and technology, and usually through a lens of accommodation. However, these fields often fail to consider accessibility on a community-wide scale. In other words, they often fail to consider the individual personal experiences of those who are most impacted by accessibility considerations.

## **Critique of procurement policies and practices**

The panelists urged that institutions must have a robust accessible procurement policy if they do not have one already. The purchase and implementation of technological systems and platforms is something that post-secondary institutions need to pay closer attention to. Learning Management Systems (LMS) for example are meant for students to use, but it is often left up to faculty and staff to enter information into these systems. However, many of these systems lack a robust training process for faculty and staff who need to use these systems. Likewise, these systems are often vetted for accessibility by students, but not by faculty and staff with disabilities. One panelist noted this process is an example of ableism. When purchasing services and technologies, it is important to consider *all* who will use those products.

An accessible procurement policy includes all paperwork and compliance materials as part of the application process. These products should also be audited by an organization first. In other words, anything purchased by an institution should be checked to make sure it meets accessibility requirements for students, faculty and staff.

## 4. Critical Reflections on Intersectionality, Structures and Systems

The fourth and final session looked at the role intersectionality, structures and systems play in fostering ableism. The panelists explored how equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) work intersects with accessibility work and ways the two sometimes conflict. There was also a discussion about institutional accountability and what actions can be taken to foster greater inclusion.



### **Lack of representation, friction, and power dynamics: The need for solidarity**

Black, Indigenous and racialized people have traditionally been excluded in discussions about accessibility. There is often a lack of representation among Black, Indigenous and racialized people with disabilities on panels, boards or committees dedicated to developing accessible systems, technologies and spaces. The lived experiences of people from diverse communities, which also includes immigrants with disabilities and 2SLGBTQI+ people with disabilities, need to be recognized and heard or systems and structures will continue to be inaccessible. A panelist also noted earlier in the day that disability studies often mostly reflect the research of white men. Likewise, much of the historical activism that marks the disability rights movement has been made through the lens of white, heterosexual participants without considering the experiences of 2SLGBTQI+, Black and racialized people with disabilities.

One panelist noted that in order to address systems that uphold ableism, discussions must include looking at white supremacy and structural racism. Ableism is intertwined with heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, colonialism and capitalism. This is why there should be an intersectional approach to addressing ableism.

There was also a contention that those engaged in EDI must deepen their intersectional approach to their work in order to advance accessibility and address ableism. EDI and accessibility work should be complementary and mutually reinforcing. The undercurrent of “oppression olympics” also affects both EDI and access work. The term refers to how marginalization is often judged by comparing which group (based on race, gender, socioeconomic status or disability) is most oppressed. It also creates a myth that only one issue or cause can be addressed at a time.

Panelists asserted that for change to happen at post-secondary institutions, there is a need for EDI and accessibility offices to hold senior leadership accountable. There must be transparency and collective responsibility at all levels of an institution to ensure that discriminatory practices are addressed. There also needs to be accountability and transparency at every level of the decision-making process, not just at the senior administrator level. Involving and consulting students, faculty and staff with disabilities should also be an important part of decision-making structures for structural and systemic change, and students should have a meaningful place in an institution's governance. Accountability mechanisms and measures of success toward goals need to be defined in collaboration with these partners as well.

Panelists also suggested that spaces need to be created so Black, Indigenous, racialized and other equity-deserving people with a disability can feel a sense of belonging, build community, share resources and develop mentorship opportunities. These spaces need to be supported by institutions but they should be created by students, faculty and staff with disabilities. These spaces can promote environments where conversations about racism, transphobia and other forms of systemic oppression that intersect with ableism can be held. These spaces not only help promote student well-being, they also acknowledge that the experiences of 2SLGBTQI+, Black and racialized people with disabilities are different from those of white students, faculty and staff with disabilities.

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*“Equity, diversity and inclusion work and access work are meant to be synonymous and interchangeable. You cannot do one without the other, otherwise you are not doing any of them properly.” – Jodie Glean*

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## 5. Action Beyond the Dialogues

### Culture change, intentionality and accountability

There can be deep resistance to change. Faculty, staff and students cannot simply be forced to implement change, they need to be fully supported and guided through these changes. Funding is another consideration. Faculty are often expected to engage in Universal Design during their downtime, while there often is not space carved out to train, monitor and support faculty to do this work. There must be a financial plan in place to support unanticipated access needs for students, staff and faculty.

The post-secondary sector should be striving to achieve genuine inclusiveness. One way to start is for ableism to be addressed as a systemic issue built into institutions, not as an individual form of discrimination. The same way racism, sexism and ageism are not just one person's prejudice directed at another person, these are structural and deeply entrenched issues. One solution might be looking at decolonizing policies and practices. Decolonization has created conditions to start dismantling ageist, sexist and racist systems, and it might also provide paths to dismantling ableism.

The role of senior administrators is important. There needs to be a will to embed inclusive policies and then fund these policies to enact them. Leaders can also promote collective decision-making by creating opportunities for students, faculty and staff with disabilities to share their experiences and influence policy. Bringing these views to the table not only fosters a greater sense of belonging and inclusion within an institution, it can also help hold leadership accountable. Institutional leadership also needs to be committed to collecting data to make sure they are making progress on accessibility within their institutions. They can also ensure education and training programs are in place to assist all members of their community to recognize and combat ableism.

Making a commitment to addressing ableism and creating accessible academic environments means being intentional about goals at the outset of a project, not at the end. Are the policies that inform the project informed by human rights and the perspectives of those with lived experiences? Who is leading the process? Who is not represented? What does meaningful engagement look like? Have people been given the ability to flourish?

There is a need for a framework that helps guide decision-making. This can include a checklist of things that need to be done (such as consultations, representation in leadership groups and collaboration with diverse communities) during the decision-making process. A meaningful action might also include ensuring that experiences of those most affected by oppressive

systems are given the time and space to share their experiences. This might mean offering space for someone else or advocating on behalf of others.

Panelists noted that taking action requires challenging the balance of power and the focus on systems and cultures that uphold the status quo. Focusing on educating staff and faculty through workshops, seminars, field trips, dialogue and courses can help build an intersectional lens. Representation is also important. Committees and hiring panels need to be diverse and reflect the communities they are designed to represent. It is also important for students, faculty and staff with disabilities and their allies to constantly challenge their leadership to make sure they are being held accountable in meeting accessibility targets. Post-secondary leaders need to prove they are meeting these targets by consistently providing updated targets and substantiating it with meaningful data that is publicly available.

## **Mutuality, knowledge sharing and opportunities for inclusive innovation**

Many post-secondary institutions are large and fragmented, so policies and practices in one department might be different from another. Similarly, the barriers to learning that students with disabilities face may be similar to those faced by other students on campus. For example, the barriers faced by international students in accessing culturally appropriate services may mirror barriers faced by students with disabilities. Breaking down silos, collaborating across institutions and merging resources to support all students can help. Institutions can also create spaces, including spaces grounded in disability and culture such as disability-specific art galleries, to help foster a sense of belonging, encourage dialogue and incubate new ideas.

There are also accessibility features that can benefit everyone across an institution; if they are already built in, they will cost less to implement more broadly. By prioritizing universal design principles in the classroom and built environment, and by creating incentives for teaching staff to develop universal design elements, this can minimize the need for accommodations after the fact.

Incorporating accessibility at the beginning of a project such as a website redesign or a new building can be less expensive and more effective than making accessibility improvements later on. For example, making internal documents that can be read by text readers is something that can be used by everyone at any time.

When it comes to the physical environment, building designers might be aware of local building codes, but have they considered neurodivergence or gender identity in their planning and consultations? Have they considered people using mobility devices to design bathrooms? These considerations may not be necessary to meet local building codes, but that does not mean they are fully inclusive of an entire community's needs. Planning and design practices should include partnering with individuals who have a lived experience of disability to identify barriers, study

solutions through planning tools and bringing accessibility best practices into curriculum for urban planning programs.

Discussions about accommodation should include larger systemic and structural issues around student workload and stress. The pandemic has created opportunities to embrace a hybrid model of teaching that includes virtual and in-person learning. It was noted that expecting students to learn in traditional formats, such as in-person, lectures lasting several hours or tutorials that are delivered in 12-week semesters and use conventional timed tests or exams, do not match actual life or learning experiences of students. It might be time to reconsider this model of education for more personalized approaches such as online learning and greater one-on-one or small group learning experiences, as well as blended (online and in-person) or non-semester systems.

The pandemic expanded access in several ways. By pivoting online, educators learned how to capture video, provide transcripts and share ways students could access course content at any time. It could also be an opportunity to reassess timed testing. The panelists noted that research shows students do not learn more, retain more knowledge or study more effectively when tests are timed. For example, a three-hour exam may not measure fluency or the ability to use different strategies in assessing knowledge compared to assignments. Timed tests can also bring high levels of stress and anxiety, which can affect student performance.

## **Sector-wide collaboration**

The post-secondary sector can do a better job of creating a system that is seamless from one institution to another, as a way of dismantling ableist policies, practices and procedures. This could mean harmonizing accessibility policies so they are consistent across the sector, facilitating sector-wide training opportunities, or collaborating on ways to hold the post-secondary system accountable. This could be done by developing a charter or agreement similar to what the first National Dialogues and Action did for anti-Black racism and Black inclusion in Canadian higher education.

The sector can also do a better job of anticipating accessibility requirements. Accessibility requirements are often handled through an HR framework where a wellness office is responsible for providing services. Making a student with a disability go to a wellness office for access needs is an antiquated and demeaning process. By medicalizing their disability, it sends a message that their disability is in need of fixing, which is very different from seeing disability as acceptable. It is also a demeaning process to force a student to repeatedly go back to a wellness office to “prove” their disability and receive an accommodation.

One panelist noted that fellow faculty and staff with disabilities should draw on their shared experiences to build interdependent relationships. This can help create a work-life model that

buffers against the hyper-productive norms of academia (such as the need to constantly publish research and secure grants) but still allows faculty and staff with disabilities to meet the demands of post-secondary work. This could mean sharing resources and best practices with fellow colleagues, greater access to internal grants and financial awards, or having a bigger seat at the leadership table so that ableist policies and practices can begin to be dismantled within institutions.

The post-secondary sector can network and collaborate to harmonize procurement policies so vendors must create accessible products. Materials and best practices for accessibility procurement can also be shared by colleagues across the sector. An accessible procurement policy needs to cover the lifetime of a product, from initial development to training and implementation. It should also be sent to all vendors so the requirements of doing business with an organization are clearly defined.

Faculty and staff can ask textbook vendors whether their product is LMS accessible. Many students also dislike moving across various LMS, especially those that are not accessible, so institutions can try limiting the number of LMS in use. Universal design holds that technology should be simple and easy to use. Institutions can also put pressure on vendors to ensure their products and designs are accessible, especially through collective action. Institutions should also train those using LMS platforms on the built-in accessibility features. It is important that funding and support be made available not only to students with disabilities but also departments so they do not have to pay for accessible technologies and textbooks on their own.

There also needs to be collective expertise on accessibility and inclusion across institutions — it cannot be left to an individual or small group. In other words, all faculty and staff need to be trained on policies and best practices so they can embed accessibility into their work. There also needs to be good record-keeping to make sure departments and institutions are held accountable in ensuring they are creating accessible spaces. They also must ensure that products and services are audited for accessibility and that mistakes are not made in future purchases. Institutions also need to pay greater attention to considerations that make conferences accessible (such as venue choice, multiple locations, distance between locations, technology, assistive animals and assistive devices).





# Concluding Remarks by Professor Wisdom Tettey, Convenor (Vice-President, University of Toronto, and Principal, University of Toronto Scarborough)

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I want to thank all of the panelists, moderators and participants who took part in the second National Dialogues. It was heartening to have more than 1,000 participants representing more than 80 academic institutions across Canada take part.

This is important work and represents a collective and shared responsibility for all of us to pursue. We are better off when we work together on these issues. I am particularly grateful to colleagues that have been on the planning committee over the past year. I am immensely grateful for all the people who made sure these dialogues were a success. We don't take this work for granted.

For those who raised questions about intra-panel representation, I assure you that the organizing committee was very much attuned to this and tried to cover the range of people who are represented in our community. I hope that, over the course of the day, you noticed through the composition of the panels that an effort was made to ensure representation. We did reach out to people who would have made the panels more representative. Unfortunately, many were not able to attend, but please know that we did invite them. In any case, the diversity of participants ensured that each session benefited from the interactions between the panel and the audience and related insights, lived experiences, and critiques.

This work continues to be part of our collective mission and we hope that today we've been able to acknowledge certain truths, some of which were difficult for us to accept because we tend to think we are making progress. This is not to deny that progress exists, only to state it hasn't been good enough. We still have work to do in creating inclusive communities where people feel a sense of belonging and can be the best version of themselves. When the deficit model that stands in our way of collective sharing is removed, we can then benefit from everything our community brings to the table. Speaking about the table, I think one thing we can all take away is that the table is still not as representative as it needs to be. If it's not representative, we are not going to find the answers we need, because answers come from people with lived experiences — those with a sense of how to negotiate and manage these complex issues.

I want to speak briefly about next steps. This is meant to be a conversation. We don't have the answers about particular action items, but we're hoping what you learned here gives you a

sense of what needs to happen. We have tried to pool this information into something we can all share and continue to learn from. One of the advantages of the higher education sector is we pride ourselves on the mobilization of knowledge and people. We need to ensure consistency across our sector so that irrespective of where you go, you can benefit from a shared understanding of ableism and the need to dismantle it.

We also want to ensure we can create opportunities for all of us to thrive and do well. The goal is to help bring these collective conversations into the public space so that we can all bring about positive change.

## Acknowledgement and Gratitude

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### National Dialogues and Action Planning Committee

Chloë Atkins  
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Cassandra Hartblay  
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Joanne Hanna  
Jennifer Martel  
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## **Panelists and Institutional Affiliation at the time of the National Dialogues**

Erin Anderson (OISE)  
Liza Arnason (ASE Community Foundation for Black Canadians with Disabilities)  
Chloe Atkins (University of Toronto)  
Darla Benton Kearney (Mohawk College)  
Kate Clark (Dalhousie University)  
Jay Dolmage (University of Waterloo)  
Olga Dosis (George Brown College)  
Catherine S. Fichten (Dawson College/McGill University)  
Frederic Fovet (Thompson Rivers University)  
Sarah Gauin (Algonquin College)  
Meric Gertler (University of Toronto)  
Jodie Glean-Mitchell (University of Toronto)  
Kelly Hannah-Moffat (University of Toronto)  
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Cassandra Hartblay (University of Toronto)  
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Bonnie Lashewicz (Cumming School of Medicine)  
Anne McGuire (University of Toronto)  
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Mahadeo Sukhai (Canadian National Institute for the Blind)  
Wisdom Tettey (University of Toronto)

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# **Appendix**

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## **Program Schedule**

**December 2, 2022**

### **Welcome and Opening Remarks (10:00 – 10:15 a.m.)**

Remarks by Meric Gertler and Kelly Hannah-Moffat (University of Toronto)  
Context setting and housekeeping items by Wisdom Tettey (University of Toronto Scarborough)

### **Session 1: Ableism and the Canadian Academy – Interrogating the Culture and Systems of Exclusion (10:15-11:45 a.m.)**

Panelists:

Jay Dolmage, University of Waterloo  
Olga Dosis, George Brown College  
Esther Ignagni, Toronto Metropolitan University  
Bonnie Lashewicz, University of Calgary

Moderator:

Cassandra Hartblay, University of Toronto Scarborough

(Lunch Break - 11:45-12:30 p.m.)



**Session 2: Inclusive (Co/Extra) Curriculum and Learning Design, Work Facilitation, and Research Supports (12:30-2:00 p.m.)**

Panelists:

Erin Anderson, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education  
Darla Benton Kearney, Mohawk College  
Frederic Fovet, Thompson Rivers University  
Anne McGuire, University of Toronto

Moderator:

Chloë Atkins, University of Toronto Scarborough

(Health Break - 2:00-2:30 p.m.)

**Session 3: Inclusive Infrastructure Design and Planning: From Procurement to Technology Systems and the Built Environment (2:30-4:00 p.m.)**

Panelists:

Kate Clark, Dalhousie University  
Catherine Fichten, McGill University and Dawson College  
Mahadeo Sukhai, Canadian National Institute for the Blind

Moderator:

Ben Poynton, University of Toronto

**Session 4: Wrap Up: Critical Reflections on Intersectionality, Structures, and Systems (4:00-5:00pm)**

Panelists:

Liza Arnason, ASE Community Foundation for Black Canadians with Disabilities  
Sarah Gauen, Algonquin College and Canadian Association for the Prevention of Discrimination and Harassment in Higher Education (CAPDHHE) Board  
Jodie Glean-Mitchell, University of Toronto  
Karima Hashmani, Metrolinx

Moderator:

Cherilyn Scobie Edwards, University of Toronto Scarborough

**Closing remarks (5:00 p.m.)**

Remarks by Wisdom Tettey, University of Toronto Scarborough