Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Implications of COVID-19 on University Research

Ontario Council of University Research: COVID-19 Recovery Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Working Group
TBD 2021

Executive Summary for the Tri-Council+ Agencies

This executive summary is intended to present an overall picture to senior leadership at Tri-Council+ Agencies regarding the state of affairs at Canadian universities as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This report provides an introduction, a backgrounder addressing scope of study and challenges, as well as promising practices implemented and a set of recommendations.

The introduction outlines the disruption incurred by this pandemic and references the emerging literature that illustrates productivity gaps for marginalized groups. We have attached an appendix of relevant literature. The background section outlines:

1. An overview of the work done to date by the Ontario Council of University Research (OCUR) COVID-19 Recovery Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Working Group;

2. Challenges facing scholars due to the pandemic, including potential long term and differential impacts on communities, effects on research offices and field scholars, and mental health and well-being; and

3. Promising practices implemented by Ontario universities.

We conclude with a series of eight recommendations under four general categories:

A) *Targeted support for those disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.*

   1. Provide a funding envelope for institutions to utilize to address the un-equal impacts of COVID-19 on scholars from marginalized groups.

   2. Provide access for institutions to view disaggregated data related to the Dimensions Charter.

B) *Re-assess grant funding application and adjudication process during the pandemic.*

   3. Improve guidelines/instruction to assist researchers with completing the COVID-19 Interruption Form (e.g. provide examples of how research may have been impacted to encourage scholars from marginalized groups to complete the form).

   4. Provide additional guidance or training to reviewers on how information concerning COVID-19 impact should be considered when ranking.

   5. Award a higher value to the mentorship of highly-qualified personnel (HQP) from marginalized groups in the adjudication process.

C) *Seize opportunities for dialogue and collaboration.*

   6. Convene a meeting with the Working Group and the Tri-agency Institutional Programs Secretariat (TIPS) Advisory Committee on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Policy (ACEDIP) in 2021 to exchange information and discuss possible strategies to address the unequal impact of COVID-19 on researchers in marginalized groups.

7. Convene a committee of relevant stakeholders to co-create guidelines on how COVID-19 delays could be clearly operationalized by applicants and fairly adjudicated by peer reviewers to support equity.

D) ***Review the Canada Research Chair program to support researchers disproportionately impacted by COVID-19.***

8. Provide cost-extensions to CRCs from marginalized groups.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the traditional model of postsecondary campus-based and field-based research. Emerging literature and anecdotal evidence highlight that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected research productivity at Canadian universities and that this impact has been borne by specific groups of researchers more than others.

The pandemic has unduly impacted bench scientists, scholars who conduct face to face research with humans, conduct field work or work internationally, and researchers with caregiving responsibilities, while also compounding existing inequities that impact scholars from the following federally designated groups: women, Indigenous persons, persons with disabilities, and racialized minorities.

Inequities existed before COVID-19 between specific groups of researchers; however, these have been exacerbated and the gap has widened.

Impacts are two pronged; both within the university (e.g. tenure/promotion) and external to the university (e.g. future research funding success) and will have ramifications on an individual's personal and professional trajectory, as well as that of the greater research enterprise and talent pipeline in the country. Emerging literature shows that productivity gaps of marginalized groups are more pronounced at research intensive universities and that "one-size fits all" interventions may in fact lead to greater inequities between researchers.

The background section below provides a general overview of the work of the Ontario Council of University Research (OCUR) COVID-19 Recovery Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Working Group and the challenges scholars are facing as a result of the pandemic. A summary of promising practices by Ontario universities and recommendations for consideration are provided in the sections that follow. A list of literature related to EDI and the COVID-19 pandemic that was reviewed for this work has been included as an Appendix (see **Appendix A**).

Background

OCUR COVID-19 Recovery Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Working Group: Overview

At the direction of the Council of Ontario Universities' (COU) OCUR table, the COVID-19 Recovery Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Working Group (Working Group) was convened to share challenges and opportunities, as well as best practices and learnings, related to addressing the unequal impact of COVID-19 on some researchers. The members of this table are comprised of senior leadership in the research enterprise at universities across Ontario (see **Appendix B** for Working Group membership).

A key deliverable of the Working Group was the development of recommendations focused on EDI and COVID-19 for consideration by the Tri-Council+ Agencies (Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC), the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), and the Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI)). The intent of this document and the enclosed recommendations are to help guide institutions and stakeholders in their development of an approach to address EDI, both during and post-pandemic.

Challenges facing Scholars due to COVID-19

Potential long-term impacts of the pandemic

Due to the decrease in research productivity of scholars who are unequally impacted by COVID-19, it is anticipated that there will be a noticeable drop in research publishing over the next 2 – 3 years. New hires at institutions may be unequally impacted in establishing their research program and recruiting and training highly qualified personnel (HQP), leading to an inability to write funding applications over the next year, as well as a longer-term impact (12-24 months) to be successful with future grant applications due to the decrease of scholarship output.

It is important to note that the pandemic will have longer term impacts on all scholars; however, literature and anecdotal evidence is showing that those from marginalized groups will have greater challenges.

COVID-19 is affecting communities differently

Both the literature and internal consultations by Working Group members show that marginalized groups are being disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. This burden is compounded by a number of factors that include: the intersection of politics and community, leading to increased stress and emotional labour (e.g. Black Lives Matter, U.S. election, Indigenous issues); and less student supports available due to the pandemic and adherence to public health and safety guidelines.

In addition, individuals from marginalized groups are doing a disproportionate amount of "heavy lifting" to support their communities – both within and outside of the university. This includes the fact that these researchers are spending more time providing emotional support to post-docs, and graduate students.

The result of the above challenges has resulted in a reduction of research productivity and an emotional tax on researchers specifically from marginalized groups.

Impacts on research offices

COVID-19 has also affected institutional support services for researchers. For example, budgetary constraints in some cases have led to a decrease in contract staff and part-time hours. This has led to less resources and supports being available for researchers - at a time when they require more resources and supports.

Impact on scholars who conduct research with human participants, work in the field, and work internationally

Research disciplines that have been particularly impacted by the pandemic due to the disruption and pauses in the ability to conduct research include human-participant research, field work and international research.

Researchers in these areas who are able to pivot their research to meet public health and safety guidelines will require additional resources and increased costs to redesign their methodologies. In addition, more funding may be required to secure equipment and access to technology to enable participants from marginalized communities to safely participate in a human participant research study.

Researchers requiring access to field-research sites that have been restricted due to COVID-19, for example, in the far-north, international locations or Indigenous communities, will have to wait until these restrictions are lifted, significantly disrupting their research and timelines for completion.

Mental health and wellness

A primary concern of the Working Group is the mental health and wellness of scholars during this challenging time. Many scholars and their HQP are feeling isolated, particularly Black, Indigenous, People of Colour (BIPOC) scholars that may feel a greater sense of isolation as they are unable to access safe common spaces on campus due public health and safety guidelines.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the challenges previously outlined, combined with the mental health impacts of the pandemic, suggest that there are some scholars in crisis. These individuals are making the decision to permanently leave academia, take a leave, or pause their scholarship. This exodus from academia has ramifications on the individually both personally and professionally, in addition to the greater research enterprise and talent pipeline across the country.

Promising Practices implemented by Ontario's Universities

Ontario Universities are responding with some promising practices, knowing that there is a long-tail expected in terms of the impact of COVID-19 on research productivity, and that there is much more work needed ahead.

- **Developing Training Resources**: Handbooks, EDI toolkits, videos and online training modules are being generated and implemented to support leaders and decision-makers in matters of equity, diversity and inclusion as they relate to research activity. Training of ways to 'read' and 'situate' productivity interruptions is key in training materials.

- **Increasing Flexibility in the Workplace**: Modifications of working conditions such as location and hours, as well as modified research expectations have been put into place for those affected by COVID with particular attention to marginalized groups. Modified annual performance review expectations and tenure clock extensions are clear examples of flexible approaches.

- **Checking the Pulse**: Climate surveys and reviews are being conducted with a focus on shedding light on the intersection of COVID 19 and marginalized researcher challenges. Safe spaces for expressing concerns by researchers from marginalized groups is central in this work.

- **Developing and Implementing Action Plans**: Revised Canada Research Chair (CRC) Action Plans in response to feedback from the Tri-Council are being implemented by institutions and monitored. Expanding the influence of the CRC Action Plans more broadly into the academy is an important next step.

- **Generating New/Revised Policies and Guidelines**: Codifying hiring practices of researchers from the Federally designated groups (women, Indigenous persons, persons with disabilities; racialized scholars) and other marginalized populations such as LGTBQ2+ peoples are expanding beyond CRC programs to broader institutional hiring practices.

- **Committing to Indigenous Research Ethics Sub-committees**: Sub-committees of research ethics boards reporting into the Research Ethics Board have been established for research involving Indigenous communities and participants.

- **Creating Special Funding Opportunities**: Where possible, internal grants are being established to support grant writing, article writing, as well as relief funding for duties such as marking support for researchers from marginalized groups, to provide opportunities to focus on research. Access to focused grants that do not privilege already privileged groups is essential.

- **Considering Early Career Challenges**: Establishing bridge and mentorship programs for early career researchers, graduate application and examination deadline extensions, fellowships and seed funding with minimal conditions (including use for childcare), and mental health services are supporting early career researchers.

- **Communicating and Advocating**: Presentations on COVID 19 impacts on research and highlighting the predicted long-tail effects that COVID 19 will have on research productivity are being made by members of OCUR collectively and individually to raise awareness and advocate for marginalized researchers. The Working Group has presented to Tri-Council+ Agency leaders and is looking for opportunities for further dialogue and collaboration on EDI at the federal level.

Recommendations

The recommendations below are derived from the research, discussion and internal consultations of the Working Group. These are intended for the consideration of the Tri-Council+ Agencies as part of pandemic recovery and EDI efforts. Although these recommendations were developed specifically for consideration by the Tri-Council+ Agencies, institutions and other agencies may benefit from their guidance.

A) Targeted solutions are needed for those disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

As stated earlier, early evidence is showing that "one-size fits all" interventions may lead to further inequities between groups of researchers**.** Targeted interventions need to be considered to address the ongoing impact of the pandemic. Without targeted interventions, there is a risk of losing momentum and not sustaining the gains previously made through program changes and investments to advance EDI in the research enterprise, such as those related to the Canada Research Chair (CRC) Program.

1. Provide a funding envelope for institutions to utilize to address the un-equal impacts of COVID-19 on scholars from marginalized groups. The funding for institutions would be flexible, allowing institutions to customize supports to best address the unequal impacts of COVID-19 for their researchers.

As outlined earlier, researchers who are from marginalized groups and early career researchers with small children have been particularly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is expected that this impact will extend for a number of years, and the damage to research agendas for many of the aforementioned groups could have relatively significant consequences. There have been major gains over the past few years to increase research opportunities for all in this country, and there is a danger that some of these gains could well be lost due to the impact of this pandemic on researchers.

Federal support must consider that the impact of the pandemic has not hit all groups of researchers the same. Without a nuanced approach for pandemic recovery, supports could actually widen the disparity between researchers, particularly from historically marginalized groups.

Perhaps the two most important factors for researchers to be most productive are **time** and **funding**. COVID-19 has affected both of these research drivers in ways that have been very unpredictable. To counter these adverse effects, the Working Group recommends the following:

    i.   Until July 1, 2024, the Tri-Council Agencies should extend the time limit for being classified as an Early Career Researcher (ECR) by two years. For example, for NSERC, the definition of an ECR would become applicants who have held an independent academic position for seven years or less.

    ii.   Each researcher who self-identifies as being from a marginalized group and who currently holds a Tri-Council Agency grant be provided an annual

supplement of $20,000 for two years. Such funding could be used for research time stipends if permitted by the institutions, supporting HQP, etc.

    iii.   The Tri-Council Agencies create a special "SIG-like" program that would provide a block grant to each university to support ECRs and researchers from marginalized groups. Universities would manage these grants and would need to develop criteria for distribution that would ensure funding goes to support researchers in these categories based on justified need.

2. Provide access for institutions to view disaggregated data related to the Dimensions Charter.

Access to this data will be invaluable in providing institutions with an opportunity to monitor the ongoing impact of COVID-19, as well as the impact of any targeted solutions that are implemented.

B) Re-assess the grant funding application and adjudication process in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Unconscious bias may influence the review and ranking of applications. It was also noted that the requirement to complete the COVID-19 Interruption Form places additional labour on those already disproportionately impacted by COVID-19.

3. Improve guidelines/instruction to assist researchers with completing the document (e.g. provide examples of how research may have been impacted to encourage scholars from marginalized groups to complete the form).

4. Provide additional guidance or training to reviewers on how information concerning COVID-19 impact should be considered when ranking.

5. Award a higher value to the mentorship of highly-qualified personnel (HQP) from marginalized groups in the adjudication process.

Mentorship is critically important to build a talent pipeline and a higher value in the adjudication process would reflect its importance.

C) Seize opportunities for dialogue and collaboration.

Working in partnership, universities, funding agencies and other stakeholders can collaborate to advocate and develop supports to address the unequal impact of COVID-19 on researchers in marginalized groups.

6. Convene a meeting with the Working Group and the Tri-agency Institutional Programs Secretariat (TIPS) Advisory Committee on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Policy (ACEDIP) in 2021 to exchange information and discuss possible strategies to address the unequal impact of COVID-19 on researchers in marginalized groups.

7. **Convene a committee of relevant stakeholders to co-create guidelines on how COVID-19 delays could be clearly operationalized by applicants and fairly adjudicated by peer reviewers to support equity.**

D) Review the Canada Research Chair (CRC) program with a lens on how to support researchers disproportionately impacted by COVID-19.

The sector has serious concerns regarding the impact of the pandemic on Tier 2 Chairs that will be applying for renewal in 2021. Some of the challenges experienced by these researchers include: setting up a wet-lab, conducting field-research and conducting research with human-participants during the pandemic; building industrial and community partners; recruiting HQP; and supporting existing HQP. Many CRCs recently hired are from the federally designated groups (women, Indigenous persons, person with disabilities, and racialized minorities) and are at a greater risk of having their scholarship negatively impacted due to COVID-19.

8. **Provide cost-extensions to CRCs from marginalized groups.**

   The current landscape requires flexibility to support researchers disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. A cost-extension would allow them to sustain their research programs.

Conclusion

The emerging literature and internal consultations by the Working Group show that marginalized groups are being disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and that these inequities have the potential to have longer term consequences on individual researchers, as well as the greater research enterprise – both at an institutional and federal level.

Developing meaningful solutions will require resources — such as coordination, funding and time — to ensure they can be sustained and are impactful. Recognizing these challenges, Ontario's universities are committed to working in collaboration with one another, as well as other relevant stakeholders, to find innovative solutions to alleviate the challenges placed on marginalized scholars, both during the COVID-19 outbreak and post-pandemic.

Appendices

A. Summary of research related to EDI and the COVID-19 pandemic

Unequal effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on scientists, Myers et al, Nature – *Human Behavior.*

Opinion: In the wake of COVID-19, academia needs new solutions to ensure gender equity, Malisch, J.L. et al, *PNAS.*

Gender inequality in research productivity during the COVID-19 Pandemic, Cui et al, *Harvard Business School Working Papers.*

The pandemic is hitting scientist parents hard, and some solutions may backfire, K. Langin, *Science* (Science Careers).

COVID-19 amplified gender disparities in research, Muric, G, et al., *arXiv.*

The unequal effects of COVID-19 on economists' research productivity, Amano-Patino, N, et al, *Cambridge working papers.*

Meta-Research: COVID-19 medical papers have fewer women first authors than expected, Andersen et al, *Elifesciences.*

Challenges for the female academic during the COVID-19 pandemic, Peterson Gabster et al, *The Lancet.*

Gender disparity in authorships of manuscripts on the COVID-19 outbreak, Bittante, C., et al, *Journal of Public Health.*

Disparities in the toll of the COVID-19 pandemic on publishing: Evidence the submissions to Hormones and Behavior, C. McCormick, *Hormones and Behavior.*

Sex, gender and race dimensions in COVID-19 research, L. Posenato Garcia, *SciELO Public Health.*

Gender, race, and parenthood impact academic productivity during the COVID-19 pandemic: from survey to action, Staniscuaski et al, *BioRxiv.*

B. OCUR COVID-19 Recovery EDI Working Group Membership

- Tammy Eger, Vice-President, Research, Laurentian University (*Co-Chair*)
- Lesley Rigg, Vice-President, Research, Western University (*Co-Chair*)
- Andy Dean, Vice-President, Research and Innovation, Lakehead University
- Ashok Mathur, Interim Vice-President, Research and Innovation, OCAD University
- Les Jacobs, Vice-President, Research and Innovation, Ontario Tech University
- Christine Allen, Associate Vice-President and Vice-Provost, Strategic Initiatives, University of Toronto
- Cathy Bruce, Acting Vice President, Research and Innovation, Trent University

- Rebecca Pillai Riddell, Associate Vice-President Research, York