

Underrepresented Groups of Students

Prepared for BCCAT by Paul Merner
and Patricia Beatty-Guenter



This newsletter presents the executive summary for this project report. The full report is available at www.bccat.ca/pubs/underrepresented_groups.pdf

This paper examines topics of equity and access to post-secondary education through exploration of barriers and other dimensions that serve to identify underrepresented groups in BC post-secondary education. The key purpose of the research project is to assess the policies and practices at the BC Transfer System institutions for admitting underrepresented (equity) groups of students, as well as to summarize the data sources available on the underrepresented groups.

A review of the (largely Canadian) literature of the last 20-25 years explored the causes and correlates that restrict equity of access to post-secondary education. Specifically, do causes that appear to persist represent systemic barriers to access for individuals, or are other factors at play? Exploration of such barriers, their correlates, and the magnitudes of the participation gaps noted, led to distillation of identified groups, along with their key access determinates or barriers:

- 1. Poverty:** Those from low income, or socioeconomic status backgrounds, or facing financial barriers.
- 2. Parental Education:** First generation post-secondary learners, or those with low parental education attainment.
- 3. Preparation:** Those with low secondary school success, or who are underprepared for post-secondary study.
- 4. Family:** Family or dependent responsibilities, non-traditional family structure; Former Youth in Care.
- 5. Indigenous Identity:** Including First Nations (Status and Non-Status), Metis, and Inuit.
- 6. Location:** Those from rural locations, or living some distance from post-secondary institutions.
- 7. Gender:** Men or women in specific contexts, gender-based role barriers, or LGBTQ persons.
- 8. Ability Limitation:** Those with a recognized disability, or other physical or cognitive constraint.
- 9. Cultural Distinctiveness:** Recent immigration, minority ethnicity, or English language barriers.



These groups and their defining factors or barriers might be categorized in terms of: i) conditions an individual is born into; ii) conditions of situation; and iii) personal conditions. This is important because while some barriers may be amenable to change, others are not and must be addressed in other ways. It was also noted that while some groups are easily identified as such in the sociological sense (well-defined, self-aware, cohesive, visible, having voice) others seen as underrepresented are more categories of individuals, who may share common characteristics, but who lack most of the other elements that define a 'group'.

The literature review clearly revealed aspects and correlates of each groups' participation; and that barriers and participation are rarely singular, but often contextual and conditioned (e.g., ethnic or gender underrepresentation is specific to certain program areas or types of institution). The literature review identifies the magnitudes of participation overall, and in relation to each of the underrepresented groups.

The next section contains an analysis of policies and practices, which forms the main focus of the paper. This analysis initially involved scanning websites and other digital documentation for the thirty-eight institutions of the BC Transfer System, as well as provincial government webpages and other online material. A survey of the public institutional research offices (15 of 25 institutions responded) provided information on institutional data collection practices and the identification of underrepresented groups by each. The final stage of information gathering involved interviews of admissions and other personnel from a sample of seven representative institutions to garner first-hand information about equity initiatives and access practices in an operational context.

Typically, post-secondary institutions have responded to access and equity issues in three main ways:

- 1. Programmatically** - by creating new or expanded programming, or sequestering capacity within existing programming, to meet the needs of underserved populations;
- 2. Through services** - that identify and out-reach to, or otherwise seek to enhance access by and engagement of, those populations; and
- 3. Through policy and practices** - that provide both the framework for and practical implementation of measures that also facilitate participation of underserved groups.

Although the central focus of this study is the latter category of policy and practice, we found that in many cases institutional responses were multi-faceted, and it was also often difficult to delineate boundaries across relatively seamless processes. We thus at times included non-admissions practices and services, and even programming in our examples, where these served to illustrate an institutional response as a whole (e.g., the service sequence for an underprepared learner, or for an individual with a language barrier).

Policy development is uneven, across institutions and in relation to the various groups themselves. The strongest policy statements were found with respect to the more visible and defined groups (e.g., Indigenous people and those with ability limitations). These are also areas where government mandates and legal frameworks are strong, and also true of law and policy in relation to immigration and citizenship. Sometimes policies are present but are of a general nature; that is not aimed specifically at access or participation of a particular group, and reflecting the open access nature of many institutions. For instance, all institutions have policy governing admissions requirements, but few have policies that reference a particular group of applicants. In other respects, such as with first-generation learners or those from rural origins, policy was almost entirely absent. This served to underline the differences in visibility among the underrepresented groups.

TABLE 1: Attributes (Data Elements) Identifying Underrepresented Groups, by Data Source*

Attribute	CANSIM (PSIS, RAIS)	CANSIM (Census of Canada, GSS, LFS)	CANSIM (ASETS, NGS)	CAUT	BC Student Transitions Project (including CDW)	BC Student Outcomes Surveys (APPSO, BGS, DACSO)	Other Student Surveys (e.g., BCSSE, CUSC, NSSE, UCAS)
Low income / SES	Y (student loan in RAIS)	Y	Y (student loan)			Y (student loan, sources of funds)	Y
1st generation learner / parental education			Y				Y
Underprepared / low HS success / engagement					Y (BC students)	Y (ABE courses)	Y (self-report letter grades)
Delayed / mature entrants / adult learners	Y (age)	Y	Y (age)		Y (age)	Y (age)	Y (non-traditional >21)
Family structure / dependents		Y	Y				Y
Women or Men	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Rural origins		Y (e.g., census subdivision)			Y (region, postal code)	Y (high school)	Y (distance education)
Disability				Y	Y (BC students)	Y	Y
Indigenous / Aboriginal Identity		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Ethnic minority / Visible minority	Y (country of citizenship)			Y	Y (country of citizenship)	Y (country of origin)	Y
Minority language		Y	Y		Y (BC students)	Y (learned ESL)	Y
Immigrant 1st or 2nd generation		Y				Y (immigration status)	Y
Employment / dislocated workers		Y				Y (sources of funds)	Y (employment)

* Historical surveys have also provided data for some of the significant studies cited in this paper. PEPS (last collection 2008) is subsumed under ASETS. YITS (last collection 2010) contains all of the group attributes noted above and is national and longitudinal in scope. SLS/F (collected 1991 and 1995) also contains the full range of group attributes and would provide an historical perspective if desired. Researchers seeking access to archived data sets are directed to Statistics Canada Library Services¹.

¹ <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/eng/library/index?MM=as>

A common appearance in policy statements was found in most of the public institutions. This was a 'Diversity' or 'Non-Discrimination' policy speaking to inclusiveness, cultural and other diversity, non-discrimination, equity of access, and sometimes "breaking down barriers to services". While the language of underrepresentation is not present, these policies constitute strong statements in favour of access, inclusion and equality, and are made by most public institutions in BC.

As with policy, some underrepresented groups are well supported by admissions practices designed specifically to support their needs, while other groups less so, or not at all. This is not to say that individuals are not supported during admissions processes, but that they may simply be subsumed in the general population, and are subject to the general recruitment, admissions and registration practices of the institution.

Prospective and current Indigenous students benefit from the broadest and most holistic set of targeted practices, found at virtually every public institution. These usually include a wide range of supports such as outreach, targeted admissions, assessment, course selection etc., provided in a culturally sensitive environment. Other groups served through specialized processes and services include those with an ability limitation (particularly designated persons with disabilities - PWD), the underprepared learner (through assessment and triage practices) and those with a language barrier.

Other groups may benefit from specific practices, but which are not overtly 'admissions' related, such as financial aid services for those with financial barriers; or childcare services for parent students; or distance learning services for those in rural locations. In still other cases, practices or services designed specifically for the group are largely non-existent, but individuals are served through general policies and processes. Here we reference the first-generation learner, or those from minority ethnic backgrounds. Again, this is not to say the individual is not served, but simply that practices are not targeted specifically towards them, by dint of group membership.

The conclusion identified areas where policy and practice support particular underrepresented groups, and also where this is less directly so. By and large and over time, despite policy short-comings, and some blind-spots, access has improved and continues to do so. Real, measurable improvement in access to post-secondary education for groups such as women, ethnic minority and immigrant peoples, and indeed Indigenous peoples, is evident. We also note that often a gap continues to exist, and therefor aver efforts to narrow and close it, for all underrepresented groups.

Lastly, we will illuminate the availability of data sources that support current and future research on underrepresented groups. These include the many past and current Statistics Canada sources including the Census, and other data sets and surveys available through CANSIM, such as PSIS, NGS and the LFS. There are also discontinued but still available Statistics Canada surveys such as YITS, PEPS and SLS/F, and the CAUT publication which is also national in scale. Provincial / Institutional data sets include the CDW and STP, and the BC Outcomes Surveys, and Institutional / Consortia data sets such as CUSC, NSSE and UCAS (Table 1).