

Canada Research Chairs program announces new, more ambitious equity targets

Changes affect four equity-seeking groups: women, persons with disabilities, Indigenous people and visible minorities.

By MATTHEW HALLIDAY | SEP 09 2019

After 13 years of slow progress towards its equity goals, the Canada Research Chairs (CRC) program is redoubling efforts to improve diversity within the program. On July 31, the Tri-agency Institutional Programs Secretariat (TIPS) – which represents the three granting councils under which CRCs are allotted – announced more ambitious targets for representation of four equity-seeking groups: women, persons with disabilities, Indigenous people and visible minorities.

The new targets are **an addendum** to the program’s 2006 Canadian Human Rights settlement agreement, which grew from a complaint brought against the program in 2003 by eight female researchers, who argued that its poor representation of equity groups was discriminatory. The addendum includes both more ambitious goals and new accountability measures which represent “not just carrot, but some stick too,” for institutions that don’t make progress toward the new goals, according to David Robinson, executive director of the Canadian Association of University Teachers.

“In the past few years we’ve found not only that some institutions aren’t achieving their goals, but were even going backwards,” says Mr. Robinson. “It’s pretty clear that more needed to happen.”

The new targets will be based on each group’s representation in the Canadian population at large, as determined by the 2016 federal census. That means substantial leaps over the existing targets, which were instead tied to each group’s availability within the available pool of university researchers – a methodology that critics said reinforced broader under-representation of diverse groups in academia.

The target for women will go from 31 percent to 51 percent, persons with disabilities from 4 percent to 7.5 percent, Indigenous peoples from 1 percent to 4.9 percent, and members of visible minorities from 15 percent to 22 percent.

“What I like about this is that it reminds us that the commitment is to all four groups,” says Malinda Smith, a professor of political science at the University of Alberta who has researched equitable hiring in Canadian universities. “A lot of people have focused on the fact that the eight original

complainants were women, and this has often been looked at as mostly about gender equity. The other groups have often been lost in the discussion.”

Dr. Smith says that’s partly because institutions failed to collect the data needed to show progress on the other three equity groups – and when they did, often used varying methodologies that couldn’t be compared across institutions. “Those in charge of collecting this data are often not diverse themselves,” she says, “and may be uncomfortable framing and presenting these questions. That leads to intransigence, so they raise issues of privacy and other concerns as to why they can’t collect it.”

The 2017 **Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Action Plan** began to address that problem by requiring institutions to outline how they aimed to achieve the original targets, publish those plans online, and achieve them by this coming December. Nominations for each equity group grew substantially after the EDI plan. By this June, representation met, or exceeded for the first time, the original targets.

That success wasn’t unqualified, however. For example, more senior Tier 1 chairs still exhibit far less diversity than Tier 2 chairs. Only 24 percent of Tier 1 chairs are women, and only 14 percent are members of visible minority groups. Less than one percent are Indigenous – just five out of 795. To address that gap, the country’s largest 15 universities, which collectively hold 70 percent of research chairs, will no longer be able to aggregate targets across tiers. Instead, they’ll need to show equivalent diversity among both.

The addendum also includes, for the first time, measures to support LGBTQ2+ faculty, including collecting self-identification data and developing best practices for recruiting and retaining LGBTQ2+ faculty.

Institutions that don’t meet targets will risk punitive action. “They risk losing funding for positions,” says Mr. Robinson. “You would hope that isn’t necessary, but it’s an important motivator to take this seriously.”

Universities will have until 2029 to meet the targets, at which point the numbers will be reviewed in light of more recent census data.

One critique of the equity-based approach is that it prioritizes diversity over excellence. That argument doesn’t pass muster with Alice Aiken, vice-president, research and innovation, at Dalhousie University. Dr. Aiken says Dalhousie has been working with a search firm to help the university avoid the tendency to go looking for candidates “in only the usual places,” in a conscious bid to bolster diversity in the faculty’s ranks.

“One of the things that just yanks my chain is when people say the first consideration has to be excellence,” says Dr. Aiken. “There are about 2,000 research chairs in Canada. If you can’t find 2,000 excellent scholars from all sorts of backgrounds, you’re not looking very hard.”