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UNIVERSITY • CANADA

Enhancing Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, Accessibility, and  
Decolonization in Graduate Admissions

## **Expert Panel and Discussion on EDIAD in Graduate Admissions**

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Resources: <https://grad.uwo.ca/edi-d.html>

## The Western Context

The ongoing review and modification of our current admission practices and processes is embedded in the context of Western's strategic plan:

### Towards Western at 150

*“Of all the aspirations voiced by the Western community through this planning process, the expectation of a more inclusive Western stood out, and progress toward this goal will be foundational to our success in reaching the other goals articulated in the plan.”*

## Operationalizing the Western Context in Graduate Admissions

Western University is committed to equity, diversity, inclusion, accessibility, and decolonization (EDIAD) and the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (SGPS) at Western University is committed to achieving and supporting a diverse graduate community. **Specifically, it is our goal to address the historical disadvantages and under-representation of individuals from equity-deserving groups and to admit and support more Indigenous and Black graduate students, women graduate students, graduate students with disability, and LGBTQ2S+ graduate students.**

# Our journey to date:

- Reflecting on our current admission practices and processes
- Sharing reflections, identifying biases & barriers
  - Retreats
    - Biases and barriers identified
    - Characteristics of students who thrive
- Taking action
  - Voluntary, self-report questions
  - New reference template
  - ...continuing the reflection, discussion, learning, revision...

# Biases and Barriers

- **Biases** identified through reflection include:
  - **Performance Bias** related to interpretation of applicants' achievements
  - **Reputational Bias** related to prestige and reputation of previous institutions and referees
  - **Opportunity Bias** related to applicants' ability to engage in various experiences
  - **Comparison Bias** related to comparing applicants to stereotypes or ourselves
  - **Supervisor Bias** related to expectations of potential supervisors
  - **Interviewer Bias** related to expectations of interviewers
  - **Reduction/Efficiency Bias** related to “filters” used to screen applicants to enhance efficiency and speed of application review
  - **Projection/In-Group Bias** related to perceptions of how well applicants align with our interests and share our views

- **Biases** - continued:

- **Quantification Bias** related to over-reliance on quantitative data and rubrics
- **Reputational Bias** related to prestige and reputation of previous institutions and referees
- **Attribute/Characteristic Bias** related to our expectations of “typical” students (eg., age)
  - **Intersectional Bias** related to how applicants’ characteristics intersect with “normative” expectations
- **Competitive Bias** related to our perceptions of how “competitive” applicants will be for awards, scholarships, and reputation-enhancing recognition
- **Recruitment Bias** related to applicants’ perceptions of their “fit” with our programs and various factors, such as affordability of our programs

- **Barriers:**

- The way we calculate admission averages
- Conversion of grades from international institutions
- The international tuition differential for our master's programs
- The value of our funding packages, especially for master's students
- The cost of tuition in many of our professional programs
- The cost of admission applications
- The lack of graduate student housing on campus
- Linking supervisor funding with admission decisions
- Requirement (in some programs) for applicants to secure a commitment from a potential supervisor prior to admission
- Silos within the university that make interdisciplinary study challenging
- The lack of "pathways" to support non-traditional learners
- Changing requirements related to securing study permits and post-graduation work permit eligibility

# Characteristics of Students Who Thrive

- Several characteristics, most of which are difficult to extract in our current admission application or processes, were identified:
  - Work Ethic
  - Social Capital and Context
  - Integrity
  - Resilience
  - Prior Knowledge and Skills
  - Willingness/Openness and Ability to Learn
  - Communication and Writing Skills (in the language of study)
  - “Thriving Traits” – curiosity, critical thinking, multi-tasking ability, internally motivated, compassionate, respectful, team player, humility, willing to be mentored, good interpersonal skills, flexible and able to shift thinking, self-aware, able to maintain healthy work/life balance, community engaged



# Taking action

- Based on the recommendations coming out of the two retreats, we have moved forward on two key priorities:
  - Voluntary, self-report questions have been added to the graduate admission application to help us better understand our applicants.
  - A new, alternative reference letter template was created to solicit information about the characteristics of students who thrive.

# Voluntary Self-Report Questions

- Explanation of why we are asking for this personal information – Western’s commitment to Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, Accessibility & Decolonization
- Assurance of confidentiality of personal data
- Questions addressing:
  - Gender Identity
  - Sexual Orientation
  - Identification as Indigenous (First Nations, Métis or Inuk)
  - Ethnic Identification
  - Ethno-Racial Identification
  - Disability or Impairment
  - First Generation

# Responses

- From the launch of the self-report questions in mid November to early January, the vast majority of those who submitted an application (~4,500) provided at least some voluntary information (including indicating “prefer not to respond”)
- Gender Identity - 89% response rate
  - 54% women (includes trans)
  - 32% men (includes trans)
  - 3% agender, another gender, gender fluid, non-binary or queer

- Sexual Orientation - 96% response rate
  - 63% heterosexual
  - 17% asexual, bisexual, gay, lesbian, pansexual, queer or another orientation
- Indigeneity - 97% response rate
  - 1% yes - First Nations Indigenous
  - 92% no

- Ethnicity - 98% response rate
  - 22% White
  - 8% Black
  - 1% North American Indigenous
  - 24% Chinese
  - 19% South Asian
  - 9% West Asian & Middle East
  - 0.5% to 3% each: Arab, Caribbean, Filipino/a/x, Japanese, Korean, Latino/a/x, Multiracial, North African, Southeast Asian, Other

- Disability or Impairment - 97% response rate
  - 77% no disability or impairment
  - 7% mental health illness
  - 4% neurodevelopmental disorder
  - 1% physical disability or impairment
  - 1% sensory disability or impairment
  - 2% other disability or impairment
- Parents Attended University - 98% response rate
  - 61% yes
  - 29% no

# Alternative Reference Letter Template

- Instructions to referees to minimize unconscious bias
- No rating scale comparing applicant to others
- *“Thinking about your interactions with and knowledge of the applicant, how would you describe the applicant in terms of each of the following. Where possible, please provide an example.”*
  - Work Ethic
  - Resilience and Ability to Overcome Challenges
  - Oral Communication
  - Curiosity
  - Ability to Contribute as Part of a Team
  - Community Engagement
  - Integrity
  - Willingness / Openness to Learning
  - Written Communication
  - Critical Thinking
  - Adaptability / Flexibility
  - Humility

# More To Be Done

- January 26, 2023 Expert Panel
  - Learning from experts about effective use of the voluntary self-report data
- Keep the conversation going...
  - Gather ongoing feedback
  - Develop and support more training and learning opportunities
  - Consider adding a personal statement to the admission application
  - Regularly review the impact of what we've changed
- Keep revising and modifying based on feedback and learning from our shared experiences





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