

# Equitable Pathways to Experiential Learning: Executive Summary

The University of Calgary's [Experiential Learning Plan \(2020-25\)](#) strives to make experiential learning (EL) a cornerstone of the UCalgary experience. The *EL Plan* has two targets: by 2025, all undergraduate students will participate in two EL activities, and all graduate students will have the opportunity to participate in at least one EL activity. Building on an earlier pilot project to provide financial support to equity-deserving students involved in unpaid Work-Integrated Learning courses and student feedback on their experiences, the OEL initiated this research project, **Equitable Pathways to Experiential Learning**. This project aimed to engage students directly in recommendations to enhance participation in experiential learning and to identify areas of growth for UCalgary. This project was completed as part of UCalgary's participation in the Future Skills Innovation Network for Universities (FUSION) which was funded by the Government of Canada's Future Skills Centre. In Fall 2021, we initiated a cross-campus consultation process to ensure project design, methodology, and implementation was as accessible and inclusive as possible. Throughout the project, the OEL engaged two graduate and two undergraduate students as partners in the research design, the facilitation of focus groups, the data analysis and the dissemination of findings (Cook-Sather, Bovill & Fenton, 2014).

## INCLUSIVE METHODOLOGY & CROSS-CAMPUS APPROACH

Our inclusive methodology and cross-campus approach began with engaging academic staff including educational development consultants in Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) and Indigenous Ways of Knowing at the Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning. We also consulted with two highly engaged student advocates within the Student's Union (SU) and EDI student taskforces, and units across campus including: International Student Services, Leadership and Student Engagement, Office of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, Student Accessibility Services, SU and Q Centre, Student Wellness Services and the Women's Resource Centre. Following the recommendations from others, we adopted the Government of Canada's demographic framework determined by Statistics Canada. Feedback, insights and input gathered through these consultations directly informed the survey design and focus group approach. To ensure the broadest possible reach of the project, we initiated an iterative awareness and distribution plan across all faculties, student engagement units, and with relevant committees and communication leads. We also leveraged our unique networks to raise awareness for the project. Upon project launch, representatives within these groups supported recruitment by distributing digital posters and messaging via online communications channels (email, newsletters, learning management system etc.). We attribute the strong response rate to the survey to the engagement with colleagues across campus.

## FINDINGS

### Participants

We received 2,002 valid survey responses and conducted eight focus groups with 26 participants. **This represents 5.5% of the UCalgary student body**. Participants' demographics reflected UCalgary enrolment across faculties ([Office of Institutional Analysis, 2020](#)), and mirrored demographic areas and definitions determined by Statistics Canada. Demographic highlights include:

- **Degree level:** 75% of respondents indicated their enrolment as Undergraduate, 16% Masters, 5% Doctoral students, 1% in a graduate certificate/diploma, and 1% in undergraduate certificate/diploma. 2% did not state a degree level.
- **Citizenship status:** 76% of respondents reported being a citizen of Canada, 17% an international student with a study permit, 6% a permanent resident, and 1% an exchange/visiting student.

- **Racial identity:** 45% of respondents identified as a racialized/visible minority, 44% as white, and 2% as Indigenous or Aboriginal (Including those that identify as First Nations people, Métis, or Inuit). 9% preferred not to answer.
- **Gender identity:** 67% of respondents identified as a woman, 28% as a man, 6% as non-binary, gender-fluid, transgender, or Two-Spirit (Indigenous). 2% preferred not to answer. 1% selected “another gender identity”.
- **Identification with disability:** 79% of respondents identified as a non-disabled person, 14% as a person with an invisible disability, and 1% as a person with a visible disability. 6% preferred not to answer. 1% selected “another identification”.
- **Financial barriers in accessing post-secondary:** 54% of respondents reported yes, 37% no, and 2% not sure. 7% preferred not to answer.
- **Sexual orientation:** 69% of respondents identified as heterosexual, 10% as bisexual, 10% as pansexual, queer, gay, and/or lesbian, and 6% as asexual. 9% preferred not to answer. 1% selected “another orientation”.

### Respondents’ EL Experiences

Both the survey and focus groups began by inquiring about respondents’ previous EL experiences. 41% of survey respondents reported having participated in at least one EL activity. Of these, 24% have participated in 2 or more. These numbers were considerably lower for specific groups, including newcomers, students with financial barriers, students in their first and second years, Indigenous students, and racialized students. In addition, students were more likely to participate in EL as they progressed through their undergraduate degree. Among graduate students, Doctoral students and candidates were more likely to have participated in EL compared to Masters students.

### Barriers

Across all quantitative and qualitative data sets, participants reported barriers to EL spanning 8 themes:

- Design of EL activities, policies, and processes
- Lack of time and energy
- Fears, uncertainty, and imposter syndrome
- Lack of financial resources
- Limited understanding and awareness of EL
- EL activities are limited and difficult to find
- Mental health concerns
- Need for guidance from a mentor or advisor

### Solutions

In addition, across all quantitative and qualitative data sets, participants recommended solutions to reduce barriers in EL. These solutions were coded across 6 themes:

- Follow principles of universal design for learning in EL activity development
- Increasing communication and promotion of EL activities
- Provide financial supports to enable participation
- Enhanced information and resources about EL activities
- Diverse faculty and staff representation and engagement
- Increase number and variety of EL activities

## WHAT’S NEXT

Our cross-campus approach will continue as we share our project findings back to the UCalgary community. We aim to use project data to convene, connect, and amplify conversations on accessibility and inclusion in EL across campus. To begin, we will share the final report back to the many colleagues and groups who supported this project within their faculties, units, committees, and networks. This will include the students who responded to the survey and participated in the focus groups that expressed interest in seeing the findings. Next, we will enact a communications plan to share this project and its insights more broadly across and beyond the UCalgary community. These steps will both report back project findings to the campus community and prompt reflection and discussion on the insights that resonate most with the experiences and perspectives of diverse campus groups. In the coming year, we will also share the project insights at national and international conferences in higher education as well as draft articles for publication.