

REFLECTIONS ON EQUITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: ARE WE TRANSFORMING RELATIONSHIPS?

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TOPIC AND IMPORTANCE

The adoption of legislation on substantive equality in federal workplaces through Canada's *Employment Equity Act* has the potential to radically transform the world of work. However, it can only do so if the term “equity” is understood in the right way.

This essay focuses on the relationship between equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) initiatives and substantive equality. This is particularly important in higher education (i.e., universities and colleges) where barriers like wage disparities, biases in evaluating resumes, and prejudices in citation and peer review still exist. These issues aren't merely the result of a lack of educational opportunities for certain groups, as many of the racial, gender, and other equity-based disparities in the labour market continue to exist regardless of educational attainment. Hence, this essay emphasizes the need to rethink EDI initiatives by critically evaluating what “equity” *actually* means, from a legal and societal perspective.

MAIN ARGUMENTS

This paper argues that employment equity is proactive rather than reactive, meaning initiatives should identify, address, *and* prevent future issues to truly achieve equity. One key point is this regard is the importance of substantive equality. Unlike formal equality, which emphasizes equal treatment without accounting for different people's needs, substantive equality focuses on achieving equality in outcomes by acknowledging that not everyone comes from the same circumstances. This is important because societal inequalities are the product of historical inequality. Therefore, efforts to achieve employment equity must be sensitive to history and aim to remedy those harms—which may mean that some people require more support than others.

According to the author, EDI initiatives must focus on three components to achieve and sustain employment equity:

- (1) **Removing barriers:** Substantive equality is a constitutional right. Accommodating people on a case-by-case basis, while important, is not enough to achieve and sustain substantive equality. Instead, we should challenge the assumption that the standard being applied is actually neutral. If it is not, we need to remove the barriers themselves. This means actively changing workplace standards and expectations that may be discriminatory against certain equity groups, as opposed to making equity group members work around them.
- (2) **Meaningful consultation:** Instead of being top-down (i.e., where someone at the top makes all the decisions without consulting those impacted by them), effective equity initiatives require us to consider what measures actually allow us to address barriers by engaging in active dialogue with affected equity group members. Meaningful consultation is especially important in the context of employment, where “good faith” negotiations during disputes between employers and employees has been a legal expectation for many years.
- (3) **External regulatory oversight:** Voluntary initiatives are not enough. There is an important role for state action, framing and supporting workplace initiatives. This might include ensuring that funding agencies—specifically those for higher education—are obligated to consider an institution’s equity initiatives and approaches when granting money.

CONCLUSION AND ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

If EDI initiatives are to achieve substantive equality, they must focus on doing so with purpose. In the context of higher education, this means taking seriously historical exclusions that have led institutions to be less equitable and working to remedy them. Moving forward, it will be important to monitor the effectiveness of EDI initiatives to avoid inadvertently supporting superficial busy work and to focus on change. This also means taking equality rights seriously and giving them the appropriate rigour and recognition in law.