



A GUIDE:

ADDRESSING POST-SECONDARY WORKFORCE AND HR CHALLENGES IN CANADA



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INTRODUCTION

Canada's post-secondary system is facing unprecedented challenges that impact student engagement, faculty, staff, and system sustainability. From workforce shortages to increasing financial pressures, post-secondary institutions must navigate complex issues while striving to provide equitable and high-quality education and research.

This guide explores 15 of the most pressing HR challenges facing post-secondary organizations in Canada today. By understanding these issues, leaders, policymakers, and post-secondary professionals can develop informed strategies to better recruit and retain staff, allowing them to strengthen the system, improve student outcomes, and foster resilience in the face of ongoing change.



ABOUT CANADA'S POST-SECONDARY SECTOR

Canada's post-secondary education sector is a diverse and decentralized system, shaped by provincial and territorial jurisdiction and distinguished by institutional types, governance structures, and funding models. The sector includes **public universities, colleges, polytechnics, and cégeps (in Quebec)**, each offering a range of academic, vocational, and professional programs.

Public universities – such as the University of British Columbia, McGill University, and the University of Toronto – deliver undergraduate, graduate, and professional degrees and are major hubs for research and innovation. In parallel, **public colleges and polytechnics** – like George Brown College, Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT), and British Columbia Institute of Technology (BCIT) – focus on career-oriented education, diplomas, apprenticeships, and applied research.

Quebec's cégep system is unique in North America, offering pre-university and technical programs that bridge high school and university or lead directly to employment. Institutions such as Cégep de Sainte-Foy and Dawson College play a critical role in preparing students for the workforce or further academic study.

Private post-secondary institutions also operate across Canada, including faith-based universities (Trinity Western University), arts schools (Vancouver Film School), and career colleges (CDI College), offering specialized or niche programming. While they receive limited public funding, they contribute to greater educational diversity and accessibility.

Indigenous post-secondary institutions – including First Nations University of Canada, Yukon University's Indigenous governance programs, and numerous Indigenous Learning Centres – deliver culturally grounded education that supports the self-determination and success of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis learners.

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Canada's post-secondary sector is supported by public funding from provincial ministries, student tuition, research grants, and philanthropic contributions. National organizations such as Colleges and Institutes Canada (CICan), Universities Canada, and the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE) support institutional advocacy, research, and international partnerships. Research funding is largely administered by federal agencies like the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC), and Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR).

Student support services, mental health resources, and equity initiatives are increasingly prioritized by institutions, in response to rising needs and calls for more inclusive, accessible education.

Additionally, work-integrated learning programs — such as co-ops and internships — are expanding in collaboration with employers to better prepare students for the workforce.

Altogether, Canada's post-secondary ecosystem reflects a complex, evolving landscape dedicated to academic excellence, innovation, skills development, and inclusive education for learners from diverse backgrounds across the country.



HR CHALLENGES FACING CANADA'S POST-SECONDARY SECTOR

1. RECRUITMENT & RETENTION

Recruiting and retaining faculty, staff, and academic leaders is a growing challenge in Canada's post-secondary education sector. Factors such as limited career mobility, increasing workload, stagnant compensation, and a lack of diversity and inclusion in leadership contribute to turnover and disengagement (Universities Canada, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these issues, with heightened burnout, job insecurity, and early retirements among academic professionals (Canadian Association of University Teachers [CAUT], 2022). To ensure long-term sector sustainability, institutions must adopt innovative, equity-informed strategies to improve recruitment pipelines and retain high-quality talent.

New Strategies

Micro-Credentials & Skills-Based Learning Paths

- Micro-credentials are increasingly used to attract and retain staff by supporting ongoing learning and flexible career progression. For example, institutions like Humber College and eCampusOntario offer micro-credentials for faculty in teaching and digital pedagogy, helping professionals upskill in response to evolving learner needs (eCampusOntario, 2023).

Equity-Focused Hiring and Promotion Practices

- Addressing systemic barriers in hiring and promotion is critical for improving retention among underrepresented faculty and staff. Institutions such as the University of British Columbia have implemented equity targets and cluster hiring to advance faculty diversity, contributing to more inclusive academic environments (University of British Columbia, 2023).

Leadership Development Pipelines

- Structured leadership development programs help institutions retain talent by preparing staff for internal advancement. Colleges and Institutes Canada (CICan) runs the Leadership Institute series, supporting mid-career professionals from equity-deserving groups to move into senior roles (CICan, 2024).

Flexible Work and Wellness Supports

- Post-secondary institutions are enhancing retention through improved work-life balance, mental health programs, and hybrid work options. For instance, the University of Waterloo's Employee Wellness Strategy promotes mental health literacy and access to services across campus communities, directly linked to retention goals (University of Waterloo, 2023).

Case Study: Dalhousie University's Academic Staff Recruitment and Retention Strategy

Dalhousie University developed a comprehensive academic staffing plan that prioritizes recruitment of diverse faculty and outlines clear retention strategies including mentorship, transparent promotion processes, and teaching relief for early-career researchers. The strategy has contributed to higher satisfaction and improved equity outcomes (Dalhousie University, 2023).



Case Study: Simon Fraser University's Faculty Renewal Program

To address an aging workforce and succession gaps, Simon Fraser University introduced a faculty renewal program that strategically invests in hiring early-career scholars, supports tenure-track development, and builds capacity in priority research areas (Simon Fraser University, 2022). This proactive approach has stabilized retention and improved institutional resilience.

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2. MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health is a growing concern across Canada's post-secondary institutions, affecting students, faculty, and staff alike. High workloads, performance pressures, financial stress, and systemic inequities contribute to poor mental health outcomes and burnout, particularly among equity-deserving groups (Mental Health Commission of Canada [MHCC], 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these challenges, leading to increased rates of anxiety, depression, and isolation within campus communities (Canadian Association of College and University Student Services [CACUSS], 2022). Post-secondary institutions have responded with a range of strategies aimed at promoting well-being, enhancing supports, and creating more mentally healthy learning and working environments. However, gaps remain in culturally responsive services, long-term funding, and coordinated national efforts.

New Strategies

Campus-Wide Mental Health Frameworks

- A growing number of institutions are adopting comprehensive mental health strategies that integrate support services, prevention programs, and inclusive campus policies. For example, Queen's University's Campus Wellness Project uses a whole-campus approach to support mental health through academic accommodations, peer support, and faculty training (Queen's University, 2023).

Embedded Counselling and Wraparound Supports

- Some institutions have embedded mental health professionals directly within academic departments or faculties. The University of British Columbia, for instance, has implemented embedded counsellors who work within specific faculties to provide direct, contextualized support to students (University of British Columbia, 2023).

Peer Support and Mental Health Literacy Programs

- Peer-led programs help reduce stigma and increase early intervention. McMaster University's Student Wellness Centre offers peer support services and trains students to recognize signs of distress in their peers (McMaster University, 2023). Such programs enhance trust and accessibility.

Equity-Centered Mental Health Supports

- Equity-deserving students, faculty, and staff often experience racism, discrimination, and systemic barriers that negatively impact mental health. Institutions such as the University of Toronto are implementing targeted supports – such as culturally responsive counselling and anti-racism education – to meet these needs (University of Toronto, 2022).

New Strategies – Continued

Flexible Work and Mental Health Resources for Staff and Faculty

- Institutions are increasingly recognizing the need to support the mental health of their employees. York University’s Employee and Family Assistance Program provides confidential counselling, workshops, and resources to support mental wellness and work-life balance (York University, 2023).

Case Study: University of Calgary’s Campus Mental Health Strategy

The University of Calgary has implemented a multi-year Campus Mental Health Strategy that includes 28 recommendations across six focus areas. The strategy prioritizes inclusive care, leadership support, mental health promotion, and capacity building among staff. Evaluation reports indicate increased awareness, better service coordination, and improved help-seeking behaviours across the campus (University of Calgary, 2022).

Case Study: The National Standard for Mental Health in Post-Secondary Education

Launched in 2020 by the Mental Health Commission of Canada, the National Standard for Mental Health and Well-Being for Post-Secondary Students provides a voluntary framework to guide institutions in building psychologically healthy and safe campuses. More than 50 Canadian institutions, including George Brown College and Thompson Rivers University, have adopted or piloted the Standard to structure their mental health planning (MHCC, 2023).

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3. CHANGING STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

The demographic profile of students in Canada's post-secondary institutions is undergoing significant change. Immigration trends, an aging workforce, equity-focused access efforts, and shifting economic demands are reshaping who attends college and university. Institutions are enrolling more first-generation students, mature learners, international students, Indigenous learners, and students with disabilities, all of whom require targeted support to thrive (Colleges and Institutes Canada [CICan], 2023; Universities Canada, 2023).

Until recently, international students made up nearly one in five students in Canadian post-secondary institutions. Between 2010 and 2022, the number of international students more than tripled, with the majority coming from India and China (Statistics Canada, 2023a). However, in 2024, the federal government announced new immigration measures to address growing concerns over housing pressures, student exploitation, and quality assurance across private institutions.

Key Policy Change: International Student Cap and Visa Reforms (2024)

In January 2024, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) introduced a two-year cap on international study permit approvals. The national cap for 2024 was set at 360,000, representing a 35% reduction compared to 2023 levels. Caps are applied at the provincial and territorial level, significantly reducing international enrolment in Ontario and British Columbia – the provinces with the highest numbers of international students (IRCC, 2024a).

In addition to the cap:

- All study permit applications now require a **Provincial Attestation Letter** confirming institutional capacity.
- **Post-graduation work permit (PGWP)** eligibility was restricted for programs at public-private partnership colleges, which previously attracted large numbers of international students.
- Enhanced scrutiny was placed on institutional practices and agent recruitment, aiming to reduce predatory admissions (IRCC, 2024b).

These policy changes are expected to reshape international student recruitment, forcing institutions to reduce reliance on international tuition and improve program quality and student services.

New Trends

International Student Decline and Institutional Realignment

- Institutions – especially colleges in Ontario and British Columbia – are reassessing their recruitment strategies and financial models in light of the federal cap. Some colleges, like Conestoga College, have already begun reducing international admissions and reviewing program offerings for alignment with labour market priorities (CBC News, 2024).

Increasing Domestic Student Diversity

- Domestic enrolment is becoming more diverse, with more Black, Indigenous, racialized, and first-generation students entering post-secondary education. For example, the University of Toronto's 2022 Student Equity Census reported that 70% of students identified as racialized, and 9.6% identified as having a disability (University of Toronto, 2022).

Rise in Mature and Lifelong Learners

- As automation disrupts traditional industries, more mid-career professionals are returning to school. CICan (2023) reports increased enrolment in short-cycle and stackable credential programs tailored to adults seeking re-skilling.

Indigenous Student Participation and Indigenous-Led Institutions

- More Indigenous students are accessing post-secondary education, supported by culturally grounded programs and Indigenous-led institutions like First Nations University of Canada and Yukon University. These institutions are expanding language revitalization, land-based learning, and governance training programs (Universities Canada, 2023).



Case Study: George Brown College's Response to International Student Policy Changes

In response to the 2024 IRCC reforms, George Brown College adjusted its enrolment planning by prioritizing quality over quantity in international recruitment. The college expanded its supports for current international students, increased focus on domestic student growth, and began developing new micro-credentials aligned with Canada's labour market needs (George Brown College, 2024).



Case Study: Centennial College's EDI Strategy

Centennial College's Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Strategy includes targeted outreach and supports for racialized, Indigenous, and first-generation students. The college tracks student demographic data and uses it to improve access, retention, and program design (Centennial College, 2022).



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4. INTERGENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

Post-secondary institutions across Canada are increasingly navigating the realities of an intergenerational workforce and student body. Faculty, staff, and students now span five generations – from Baby Boomers to Generation Z – each bringing different values, communication preferences, work styles, and learning needs (Universities Canada, 2022). These differences can present challenges related to retention, workplace cohesion, instructional effectiveness, and policy alignment if not actively addressed through inclusive and adaptive strategies.

Institutions must consider how to support knowledge transfer between retiring faculty and early-career hires, meet the evolving digital expectations of younger students, and design inclusive policies that accommodate differing generational perspectives on mental health, work-life balance, and career progression (Canadian Association of University Teachers [CAUT], 2023).

Emerging Strategies

Multi-Generational Workforce Planning

- As more faculty retire, institutions are implementing succession plans and mentoring systems to transfer knowledge and preserve institutional memory. For example, the University of Calgary's Academic Leadership Academy pairs senior faculty with early- to mid-career academic leaders to strengthen cross-generational collaboration (University of Calgary, 2023).

Teaching and Learning Adaptations for Gen Z Learners

- Generation Z – now the dominant age group in undergraduate classrooms – expects hybrid learning, flexible schedules, and integrated digital platforms. The University of British Columbia's 2023 Flexible Learning Strategy emphasizes student-centred models, active learning, and technology integration to meet the expectations of a tech-native student body (University of British Columbia, 2023).

Redesigning Work and Communication Norms

- Workplace expectations differ significantly across generations. While older faculty may value autonomy and tradition, younger faculty and staff often seek feedback, flexibility, and social purpose. To address this, Colleges and Institutes Canada (CICan) encourages member institutions to adopt flexible workplace policies, including hybrid models and structured mentorship to enhance retention across all age groups (CICan, 2023).

Intergenerational Student Engagement Programs

- Some institutions are leveraging generational diversity as a strength through intergenerational learning models. For instance, Concordia University's Ageing+Communication+Technologies (ACT) project connects older and younger learners through digital storytelling and community research, fostering empathy and mutual understanding (Concordia University, 2022).

Case Study: Humber College's Future Skills Centre Collaboration

Through a partnership with the Future Skills Centre, Humber College has launched initiatives to understand how generational shifts are impacting skills development and career aspirations in the post-secondary context. Their programs focus on inclusive design and anticipatory skills training that benefit both younger and older learners and employees (Future Skills Centre, 2023).



Case Study: McMaster University's Staff Experience Survey

McMaster University's 2022 Staff Experience Survey highlighted generational differences in workplace satisfaction and communication styles. In response, the university adapted onboarding and professional development programs to better reflect generational needs, with a focus on wellness, continuous learning, and career mobility (McMaster University, 2022).

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5. PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

Performance management in Canadian post-secondary institutions is undergoing transformation as colleges and universities seek to align faculty and staff performance with evolving institutional goals, student needs, and labour market demands. Traditionally centered on tenure reviews, annual evaluations, and student feedback, performance management systems are now expanding to include more continuous, development-focused, and inclusive practices (Universities Canada, 2023).

Many institutions face challenges with outdated or inconsistent evaluation processes, lack of actionable feedback, and limited recognition of diverse contributions – including diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work, community engagement, and interdisciplinary teaching. These gaps can negatively impact morale, career satisfaction, and institutional accountability (Canadian Association of University Teachers [CAUT], 2023).

New Strategies

Continuous and Developmental Feedback Models

- Some institutions are moving away from once-a-year reviews and toward continuous feedback and goal setting. For example, the University of Waterloo's Performance Dialogue Program for staff emphasizes regular check-ins, coaching conversations, and mutual development planning (University of Waterloo, 2023).

Recognizing Non-Traditional Academic Contributions

- Faculty performance evaluations are evolving to include broader criteria such as DEI leadership, public scholarship, and student mentorship. The University of Toronto's revised academic review guidelines explicitly recognize work that supports inclusive teaching and community impact (University of Toronto, 2023).

Integration of Learning Analytics

- Digital learning platforms now enable more dynamic insights into teaching effectiveness. At McGill University, course dashboards track engagement and performance trends, allowing faculty to refine instructional approaches and inform teaching evaluations (McGill University, 2022).

Manager and Faculty Training in Performance Coaching

- Post-secondary leaders are investing in training programs to equip supervisors with the skills needed to deliver constructive, equity-informed performance conversations. Colleges and Institutes Canada (CICan) offers leadership institutes that include modules on performance coaching, bias awareness, and feedback frameworks (CICan, 2023).

Case Study: York University's Performance Management Framework

York University redesigned its performance management system for non-academic staff to focus on goal alignment, values-based behaviour, and two-way dialogue. The Performance and Talent Development Framework includes an annual cycle of planning, check-ins, development, and reflection, with tools to support employee growth (York University, 2022).



Case Study: Dalhousie University's Faculty Evaluation Reform

Dalhousie University implemented changes to its faculty review system to better reflect interdisciplinary work, collaborative teaching, and service contributions. These changes emerged from consultations across faculties and aim to improve transparency, relevance, and fairness in performance evaluations (Dalhousie University, 2023).



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6. LABOUR RELATIONS & COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

Labour relations play a critical role in the governance and operational stability of Canada's post-secondary education sector. Most faculty, support staff, and contract instructors in Canadian colleges and universities are unionized and represented by a range of faculty associations and labour unions. Collective bargaining processes govern key aspects of employment – including wages, workload, job security, benefits, and academic freedom – and are central to shaping the working conditions that affect institutional performance and employee well-being (Canadian Association of University Teachers [CAUT], 2023).

In recent years, bargaining tables have reflected growing tensions over workload intensification, inflationary pressures on wages, precarious employment, and equity concerns – especially regarding contract faculty, racialized workers, and staff with caregiving responsibilities (Canadian Union of Public Employees [CUPE], 2023). Disruptions such as strikes and work-to-rule campaigns have increased in frequency, placing additional pressure on institutions to modernize collective agreements and strengthen labour-management relations.

New Strategies

Equity-Focused Bargaining Language

- Unions and institutions are increasingly incorporating equity clauses into collective agreements. These clauses address systemic barriers in hiring, promotion, and workplace supports. For example, the University of Manitoba Faculty Association's agreement includes commitments to advance employment equity and reduce barriers for underrepresented groups (University of Manitoba Faculty Association [UMFA], 2023).

Addressing Contract Faculty Precarity

- A major issue in bargaining is the growing reliance on contract or sessional faculty, who often lack job security and access to benefits. In 2023, the University of Toronto reached an agreement that improved job stability and multi-term appointments for contract instructors through its CUPE 3902 Unit 3 bargaining unit (CUPE 3902, 2023).

Interest-Based and Collaborative Bargaining Approaches

- Some institutions are shifting toward interest-based bargaining models to reduce conflict and improve outcomes. Sheridan College and OPSEU Local 244 piloted this model to improve transparency and focus negotiations on shared goals such as workload fairness and student success (Sheridan College, 2022).

New Strategies – Continued

Expanding Scope of Bargaining Issues

- Beyond wages and benefits, unions are increasingly bargaining over issues such as remote work policies, health and safety, and institutional commitments to Truth and Reconciliation. These broadened scopes reflect the changing priorities of academic workers and the evolving role of institutions as social actors (CAUT, 2023).

Case Study: 2022 Ontario College Faculty Strike and Arbitration Outcome

In 2022, contract negotiations between the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) and the College Employer Council (CEC) representing 24 colleges reached an impasse, resulting in work-to-rule job action. Key issues included workload for partial-load faculty, academic governance, and job security. The dispute ended in binding arbitration, which resulted in modest gains for faculty and clarified processes for future negotiations (OPSEU, 2022).

Case Study: McMaster University and CUPE 3906 Agreement on Equity Commitments

In 2023, McMaster University and CUPE 3906 reached a collective agreement that included expanded support for gender-diverse and racialized teaching assistants. The agreement included additional paid training hours for equity work and improved mechanisms for addressing workplace discrimination (McMaster University, 2023).

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7. LEADERSHIP & MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT

Leadership and management development is becoming increasingly important across Canada's post-secondary sector as institutions navigate complex challenges, including digital transformation, demographic shifts, labour relations, equity mandates, and financial pressures. Academic and administrative leaders are expected to demonstrate not only academic credibility but also strong competencies in strategic planning, inclusive leadership, change management, and employee engagement (Universities Canada, 2023).

Despite these growing expectations, many institutions lack structured pipelines or succession planning frameworks to support leadership development. The sector often relies on faculty who ascend into leadership roles without formal management training, leading to uneven capacity and limited diversity in executive positions (Canadian Association of University Teachers [CAUT], 2023).

New Strategies

Leadership Development Institutes and Fellowships

- National organizations such as Colleges and Institutes Canada (CICan) and the Centre for Higher Education Research and Development (CHERD) at the University of Manitoba offer leadership institutes tailored to post-secondary administrators. These programs provide structured training in governance, financial management, and inclusive leadership. CICan's Leadership Institutes also include dedicated streams for aspiring Indigenous and equity-deserving leaders (CICan, 2023).

Internal Succession Planning and Talent Pipelines

- Some institutions are building internal leadership pipelines to address succession planning gaps. For example, the University of Calgary's Academic Leadership Academy prepares department chairs and deans through experiential learning, mentorship, and peer coaching (University of Calgary, 2023). These programs are critical as many senior leaders near retirement.

Equity-Focused Leadership Development

- Addressing the lack of diversity in senior roles, institutions are prioritizing leadership pathways for racialized, Indigenous, and women-identifying employees. Toronto Metropolitan University's (formerly Ryerson) Women in Leadership program is one such initiative, offering targeted mentorship, leadership coaching, and cohort-based learning to support women's advancement in academic and administrative roles (Toronto Metropolitan University, 2022).

New Strategies - Continued

Micro-Credentials in Post-Secondary Leadership

- Micro-credential programs are emerging as a flexible way to build foundational leadership and management skills. The University of Ottawa's Microprogram in University Administration and Governance is designed for academic leaders and mid-level administrators to gain knowledge in institutional governance, strategic decision-making, and inclusive management (University of Ottawa, 2023).

Case Study: Humber College's Leadership Development Strategy

Humber College developed an internal leadership framework called Leading at Humber, designed to identify and nurture future leaders at all levels of the organization. The strategy includes competency mapping, coaching opportunities, and leadership learning paths aligned with Humber's values of equity, sustainability, and innovation (Humber College, 2022).

Case Study: Concordia University's Leadership Pathways Program

Concordia University's Leadership Pathways initiative focuses on career growth and leadership succession planning for both academic and administrative staff. The program includes tailored workshops, one-on-one mentoring, and 360-degree feedback assessments to build leadership capacity institution-wide (Concordia University, 2023).

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8. TECHNOLOGY

Technology is reshaping Canada's post-secondary education sector by transforming how institutions deliver learning, support students, manage operations, and plan for the future. The acceleration of digital adoption during the COVID-19 pandemic pushed colleges and universities to adopt hybrid and online learning models, invest in IT infrastructure, and develop new forms of digital pedagogy (Colleges and Institutes Canada [CICan], 2023).

At the same time, institutions are grappling with digital equity challenges, cybersecurity threats, evolving student expectations, and the ethical use of artificial intelligence (AI). As students and staff increasingly rely on digital platforms for instruction, administration, and collaboration, post-secondary leaders must ensure their technology strategies are equitable, resilient, and future-ready (Universities Canada, 2023).

New Strategies

Hybrid and Technology-Enhanced Learning Models

- Most institutions now operate with hybrid or flexible delivery formats, combining in-person and online instruction. For example, the University of British Columbia's Flexible Learning Initiative focuses on active learning, flipped classrooms, and digital toolkits to support engagement in both physical and virtual spaces (University of British Columbia, 2023).

Digital Equity and Access Initiatives

- Digital equity remains a challenge, particularly for students in rural or low-income communities. In response, institutions such as Yukon University have launched technology lending programs and increased bandwidth on campus to reduce access barriers (Yukon University, 2022).

AI-Enabled Learning and Administration

- Artificial intelligence is being integrated into course design, student advising, and administrative operations. The University of Ottawa has piloted AI chatbots to provide 24/7 student support and streamline frequently asked questions, improving service accessibility (University of Ottawa, 2023). At the same time, institutions are developing AI use policies to address ethical concerns and algorithmic bias.

Cybersecurity and Data Privacy Protections

- With growing digital infrastructure comes increased cybersecurity risk. Colleges such as Durham College have invested in cybersecurity education and internal data security protocols to protect student and staff information (Durham College, 2023). Sector-wide collaboration is increasing, including shared services and threat monitoring.

Case Study: eCampusOntario's Virtual Learning Strategy

In partnership with the Government of Ontario, eCampusOntario launched a \$50 million *Virtual Learning Strategy* to support the creation of high-quality digital content, simulations, and open educational resources (OER). This initiative has supported over 400 projects, improving access to flexible learning across Ontario's public colleges and universities (eCampusOntario, 2023).



Case Study: Concordia University's Digital Strategy

Concordia University adopted a comprehensive *Digital Strategy* to transform teaching, research, and operations. The strategy focuses on expanding digital research infrastructure, automating internal systems, and embedding digital literacy across academic programs to prepare students for the evolving labour market (Concordia University, 2022).

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9. BUDGET CONSTRAINTS

Budget constraints are an ongoing and intensifying challenge for Canada's post-secondary institutions. Declining provincial funding, caps on international student enrolment, inflationary cost pressures, and rising infrastructure and staffing expenses are straining institutional budgets across the country (Canadian Association of University Teachers [CAUT], 2023). In particular, the 2024 federal cap on international study permits has led to significant revenue shortfalls in provinces such as Ontario and British Columbia, where institutions have become increasingly reliant on international tuition fees (Universities Canada, 2024).

These financial pressures threaten institutional stability, student services, research capacity, and workforce sustainability. Institutions are now navigating difficult decisions around program cuts, deferred maintenance, hiring freezes, and contract renegotiations, prompting concerns about long-term viability and educational quality (Colleges and Institutes Canada [CICan], 2023).

New Strategies

Revenue Diversification

- To reduce dependence on tuition and government funding, institutions are exploring alternative revenue sources such as continuing education, micro-credentials, research commercialization, and philanthropic donations. For example, McGill University's Made by McGill campaign has raised over \$1 billion for research, scholarships, and innovation (McGill University, 2023).

Cost Containment and Shared Services

- Many institutions are pursuing cost-efficiency strategies through shared services, centralized procurement, and digital transformation. OntarioTech University and Durham College have implemented joint IT infrastructure and shared administrative services to reduce operational costs while maintaining service quality (OntarioTech, 2022).

Financial Scenario Planning and Risk Management

- Universities such as Simon Fraser University have adopted multi-year financial planning models to manage fiscal uncertainty. These models allow institutions to adjust to enrolment fluctuations, government policy changes, and market risks (Simon Fraser University, 2023).

New Strategies - Continued

Advocacy for Funding Reform

- Sector associations and institutional leaders are advocating for changes to provincial funding models. In Ontario, the Blue Ribbon Panel on Postsecondary Financial Sustainability released a 2023 report calling for immediate funding increases, tuition policy reviews, and expanded capital investments to stabilize the sector (Ontario Ministry of Colleges and Universities, 2023).

Case Study: Laurentian University's Financial Crisis and Restructuring

In 2021, Laurentian University entered insolvency under the Companies' Creditors Arrangement Act (CCAA), marking the first such case in Canadian post-secondary history. The crisis resulted in the termination of 69 programs and over 100 faculty and staff positions. It triggered a national dialogue on the risks of underfunding, over-reliance on tuition, and the need for stronger financial oversight in higher education (Auditor General of Ontario, 2022).

Case Study: BCIT's Budget Optimization Strategy

Facing provincial budget limitations, the British Columbia Institute of Technology (BCIT) launched a budget optimization strategy that included targeted investments in high-demand programs, energy efficiency upgrades, and reallocation of internal resources based on enrolment and labour market alignment (BCIT, 2022).

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10. REGULATORY COMPLIANCE

Regulatory compliance is a critical operational concern for Canadian post-secondary institutions, which must navigate a complex landscape of federal, provincial, and sector-specific legislation. Compliance requirements span areas such as health and safety, labour law, accessibility, freedom of information and privacy, financial reporting, environmental standards, research ethics, and student protections (Council of Ontario Universities [COU], 2023).

Increased government oversight, public accountability expectations, and rapidly changing policies – particularly related to international student enrollment, equity and accessibility mandates, and cybersecurity – have intensified compliance burdens. Institutions face rising costs and administrative complexity, often without corresponding increases in funding or resources (Universities Canada, 2023).

New Strategies

Centralized Compliance Offices and Internal Audit Functions

- To improve coordination and reduce risk, institutions are creating centralized compliance offices or strengthening their internal audit functions. For example, Dalhousie University's Office of Compliance and Risk Management oversees adherence to internal policies and external regulatory frameworks across the institution (Dalhousie University, 2023).

Integrated Compliance Management Systems

- Digital tools are increasingly used to manage regulatory requirements, automate reporting, and monitor risks. The University of Alberta has implemented a compliance management system that tracks legal obligations, assigns accountability, and alerts relevant departments when regulations change (University of Alberta, 2023).

Training and Awareness Programs

- Institutions are investing in regular training programs for faculty and staff on topics such as research ethics, accessibility, workplace safety, privacy, and human rights. McMaster University, for example, offers mandatory compliance training modules aligned with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) and Occupational Health and Safety Act (McMaster University, 2023).

Sector Collaboration and Shared Guidelines

- Post-secondary associations are playing a key role in guiding institutions through regulatory changes. Colleges Ontario and Universities Canada regularly publish toolkits and guidance on meeting evolving government mandates, including those related to Indigenous reconciliation, DEI reporting, and data privacy (Colleges Ontario, 2023; Universities Canada, 2023).

Case Study: Compliance with the 2024 Federal International Student Reforms

In response to IRCC's 2024 international student policy reforms, post-secondary institutions are now required to issue provincial attestation letters (PALs) for each international study permit application. Institutions in provinces like Ontario and British Columbia have had to rapidly implement verification systems and cross-departmental workflows to ensure compliance with these new federal requirements (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada [IRCC], 2024).

Case Study: University of Ottawa's Institutional Research Ethics Board (REB) Compliance

The University of Ottawa's REB system has adopted digital workflows and continuous education to strengthen compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2). These updates have improved approval timelines and researcher adherence to federal research ethics standards (University of Ottawa, 2023).



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11. REMOTE AND HYBRID WORK INTEGRATION

Remote and hybrid work have become permanent fixtures in the Canadian post-secondary sector following the COVID-19 pandemic. While many faculty and staff have returned to on-campus roles, institutions continue to adopt flexible work arrangements to attract and retain talent, improve work-life balance, and support operational resilience (Universities Canada, 2023).

These shifts require post-secondary institutions to navigate new challenges related to performance management, employee engagement, equity of access, cybersecurity, and campus culture. Effective hybrid work models must also support collaboration across academic and administrative teams, while maintaining the high level of service expected by students and other stakeholders (Colleges and Institutes Canada [CICan], 2023).

Emerging Strategies

Formal Remote Work Policies and Guidelines

- Many institutions have introduced formal policies that outline eligibility, expectations, and accountability for remote or hybrid work. For example, the University of British Columbia's Hybrid Work Program includes eligibility assessments, role-based criteria, and shared team agreements to support clarity and fairness (University of British Columbia, 2023).

Flexible Scheduling and Work-Life Balance Supports

- Flexible work options are being used as a recruitment and retention tool—especially for staff with caregiving responsibilities or accessibility needs. McMaster University's Flex@Work framework promotes employee autonomy while supporting departmental service goals (McMaster University, 2023).

Technology Enablement and Digital Collaboration

- Institutions are investing in IT infrastructure, cybersecurity, and digital collaboration tools to support remote work. Dalhousie University upgraded its VPN access, integrated secure document-sharing platforms, and expanded its use of Microsoft Teams to ensure continuity of operations across hybrid environments (Dalhousie University, 2023).

Equity and Inclusion in Remote Work Design

- Post-secondary institutions are beginning to evaluate how remote work intersects with equity, accessibility, and inclusion. The University of Waterloo has embedded DEI principles into its remote work planning, ensuring that hybrid policies accommodate staff with disabilities, diverse communication needs, and varying home environments (University of Waterloo, 2023).

Case Study: Carleton University's Flexible Work Pilot

Carleton University launched a flexible work pilot program in 2022 to test hybrid models across administrative units. The program included surveys, focus groups, and feedback loops to measure productivity, collaboration, and employee satisfaction. Results led to the development of long-term hybrid work guidelines in 2023, which now support over 1,000 employees (Carleton University, 2023).



Case Study: George Brown College's Hybrid Workforce Strategy

George Brown College implemented a hybrid workforce strategy that includes leadership training, digital wellness initiatives, and ergonomic support for home offices. The strategy supports both unionized and non-unionized staff and has contributed to improved engagement and decreased turnover post-pandemic (George Brown College, 2023).

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12. SUCCESSION PLANNING AND KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

Succession planning and knowledge transfer are growing priorities across Canada's post-secondary sector as institutions face significant workforce transitions. Many colleges and universities are experiencing the dual challenge of leadership retirements and a shortage of prepared mid-level leaders, particularly as Baby Boomers exit the workforce and early-career professionals seek clearer advancement paths (Universities Canada, 2023).

Without structured succession plans, institutions risk leadership gaps, operational disruptions, and the loss of institutional memory. In academic settings – where leadership transitions often occur within decentralized and collegial governance models – the absence of systematic knowledge transfer can hinder continuity, equity, and innovation (Canadian Association of University Teachers [CAUT], 2023).

New Strategies

Formal Succession Planning Frameworks

- Some institutions are embedding succession planning into their human resources strategies. For example, Simon Fraser University's People Plan includes long-term succession planning for academic and administrative roles, with a focus on leadership readiness, diversity, and internal mobility (Simon Fraser University, 2023).

Structured Onboarding and Offboarding Processes

- To reduce knowledge loss during staff transitions, institutions are formalizing offboarding processes that capture institutional knowledge, relationships, and key workflows. Dalhousie University developed an internal Knowledge Transfer Toolkit to support managers in guiding outgoing staff through documentation and mentoring activities (Dalhousie University, 2022).

Mentorship and Leadership Development Pathways

- Mentorship plays a central role in knowledge transfer. Humber College's Leading at Humber framework pairs experienced leaders with emerging professionals to support learning, succession planning, and strategic alignment (Humber College, 2022). These programs are especially important in advancing equity-deserving employees into leadership pipelines.

Talent Mapping and Workforce Analytics

- Institutions are leveraging HR analytics to identify future leadership needs, skill gaps, and high-potential employees. The University of Ottawa has implemented talent mapping tools to forecast retirements and align internal development programs with emerging roles (University of Ottawa, 2023).

Case Study: University of Calgary's Academic Leadership Academy

The Academic Leadership Academy at the University of Calgary supports succession planning by preparing department chairs, deans, and research leaders through structured leadership training, peer learning, and coaching. The program has become a key tool in supporting institutional continuity and leadership renewal (University of Calgary, 2023).



Case Study: Colleges Ontario's Talent Retention and Succession Toolkit

Colleges Ontario released a sector-wide Succession Planning Toolkit in 2023, offering practical tools and templates to support colleges in developing internal talent, tracking retirement risks, and preparing for executive transitions. The toolkit was co-developed with input from HR leaders across Ontario's 24 public colleges (Colleges Ontario, 2023).



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13. DIVERSITY, EQUITY, INCLUSION (DEI)

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) have become central priorities for Canadian post-secondary institutions, reflecting a commitment to creating inclusive environments that support the success of all students, faculty, and staff. Institutions are implementing comprehensive strategies to address systemic barriers, promote diverse representation, and foster a culture of belonging.

Institutional DEI Strategies

Development of DEI Frameworks and Action Plans

- Many universities and colleges have established formal DEI frameworks and action plans that outline specific goals, initiatives, and accountability measures. For instance, Universities Canada has introduced a DEI Action Plan for 2024–2029, focusing on culture change, measurable progress, policy development, and federal investment (Universities Canada, 2023).

Data-Driven Approaches

- Institutions are increasingly utilizing self-identification data to inform their DEI efforts. This data helps in benchmarking progress, developing targeted recruitment strategies, and ensuring equitable practices in hiring and promotions (Universities Canada, 2023).

Leadership and Organizational Structures

- Effective DEI implementation often involves dedicated leadership roles and committees. The Council of Canadian Academies emphasizes the importance of leadership and organizational structures in building equitable and inclusive post-secondary institutions (Council of Canadian Academies, 2023).

Capacity-Building and Recognition Initiatives

- Capacity-building grants and recognition programs support institutions in advancing their DEI goals. These initiatives encourage the development of inclusive policies and practices, and recognize efforts that lead to meaningful change (Council of Canadian Academies, 2023).

DEI in Research and Federal Compliance Regulations

Tri-Agency DEI Action Plan

- The Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC), and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) have developed a harmonized DEI action plan. This plan outlines strategies to embed DEI principles across funding programs, peer review processes, and institutional policies, ensuring equitable access to research opportunities (Canada Research Coordinating Committee, 2025).

DEI in Research and Federal Compliance Regulations - Continued

Canada Research Chairs Program (CRCP) Requirements

- Institutions participating in the CRCP must meet specific DEI targets and develop action plans to address underrepresentation. Failure to comply can result in consequences, including the withholding of funds or public disclosure of non-compliance (Canada Research Chairs, 2023).

New Frontiers in Research Fund (NFRF) DEI Expectations

- The NFRF mandates that applicants demonstrate a strong commitment to DEI in their research design and team composition. Applicants must outline strategies to remove barriers for underrepresented groups, ensuring inclusive participation throughout the research process (SSHRC, 2024).

Case Study: University of Ottawa's DEI Action Plan Implementation

The University of Ottawa developed an Institutional DEI Action Plan to comply with CRCP requirements. The plan involved analyzing barriers to participation, implementing targeted recruitment strategies, and establishing accountability mechanisms. This comprehensive approach not only met compliance standards but also fostered a more inclusive research environment (SRA International, 2023).

Case Study: NorQuest College's Inclusive Leadership

NorQuest College in Edmonton has been recognized for its commitment to DEI, winning awards for excellence in equity, diversity, and inclusion. The college offers services and training through its Colbourne Institute for Inclusive Leadership, providing customized DEI training for leaders across Canada (NorQuest College, 2023).

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A Note on: Shifting DEI Contexts in North America

Recent political developments in the United States — started under the previous Trump administration and continuing into current White House-led initiatives — have generated a backlash against DEI initiatives in higher education. In early 2024, the U.S. Department of Education launched investigations into institutions like Cornell and Northwestern for alleged civil rights violations linked to their DEI policies. These actions resulted in temporary funding freezes, sparking concerns about institutional autonomy and free expression (Borter & Singh, 2024). Meanwhile, several U.S. states have enacted laws banning public funding for DEI offices or requiring institutions to dismantle DEI-related programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2024).

Although these developments are rooted in a different legal and political context, they have sparked important conversations in Canada. Canadian post-secondary institutions remain committed to advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion — but they are increasingly aware of the cross-border pressures and public discourse that may influence policy, funding, and public trust. Unlike the U.S., Canada’s human rights frameworks and funding bodies such as the Tri-Council continue to support DEI as a core value in education and research (Universities Canada, 2023). Nevertheless, institutional leaders must ensure that DEI strategies remain transparent, community-informed, and resilient to politicization.



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14. INTEGRATION OF INDIGENIZATION AND DECOLONIZATION INITIATIVES

Canadian post-secondary institutions are increasingly engaging in Indigenization and decolonization efforts to address historical injustices and integrate Indigenous perspectives into academia. These initiatives aim to transform institutional structures, curricula, and research practices to reflect Indigenous knowledge systems and support Indigenous communities.



New Strategies

Institutional Commitments and Frameworks

- Universities and colleges are developing comprehensive strategies to guide Indigenization and decolonization efforts. For instance, Universities Canada has outlined commitments to support Indigenous students, increase Indigenous representation in leadership, and foster respectful relationships with Indigenous communities (Universities Canada, 2023).

Curriculum Reform and Indigenous Knowledge Integration

- Institutions are revising curricula to include Indigenous histories, languages, and epistemologies. The University of Winnipeg, for example, has implemented a mandatory Indigenous course requirement for all undergraduate students, ensuring that graduates possess a foundational understanding of Indigenous issues (University of Winnipeg, 2023).

Support for Indigenous Students and Faculty

- Efforts are being made to create supportive environments for Indigenous students and faculty through mentorship programs, dedicated spaces, and culturally relevant services. NorQuest College has been recognized for its inclusive leadership and commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion, offering services and training through its Colbourne Institute for Inclusive Leadership (NorQuest College, 2023).

Community Engagement and Partnerships

- Building reciprocal relationships with Indigenous communities is central to decolonization efforts. Institutions are collaborating with Indigenous organizations to co-create programs and research initiatives that address community needs and priorities (Canadian Commission for UNESCO, 2024).

Federal Policies and Compliance

The Canadian government has established principles to guide its relationship with Indigenous peoples, emphasizing the recognition of rights, respect, cooperation, and partnership. These principles support the integration of Indigenous perspectives in education and research, aligning with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (Department of Justice Canada, 2018).☒

Case Study: University of Winnipeg: Indigenous Course Requirement

The University of Winnipeg was the first Canadian university to implement a mandatory Indigenous course requirement for all undergraduate students. This initiative, led by Indigenous students, aimed to ensure that all graduates possess a foundational understanding of Indigenous issues, histories, and perspectives. The policy has been recognized as a significant step toward decolonizing the curriculum and promoting reconciliation within the academic community (Kerr et al., 2022).

Case Study: University nuhelot'jine thaiyots'j nistameyimâkanak Blue Quills

Formerly a residential school, Blue Quills was transformed into Canada's first Indigenous-controlled post-secondary institution. Operated by First Nations communities, the university offers programs grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems and languages. Its establishment represents a powerful act of reclamation and self-determination, serving as a model for decolonizing education and restoring Indigenous governance over learning (Canadian Indian residential school system, 2023).

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A Note on: Distinguishing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) from Indigenization and Decolonization in Canada's Post-Secondary Sector

While often discussed together, **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)** and **Indigenization** and **Decolonization** are distinct frameworks within Canada's post-secondary sector. Both aim to advance fairness and inclusion, but they differ in their **historical context, scope, purpose, and approaches.**

Key Differences

Scope and Focus

- DEI initiatives broadly address systemic barriers faced by equity-deserving groups – including racialized individuals, 2SLGBTQIA+ people, persons with disabilities, women, and newcomers – across institutions.
- By contrast, Indigenization and decolonization are specifically focused on advancing the rights, sovereignty, and knowledge systems of **First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples**, in response to Canada's colonial history and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action.

Institutional Approach

- DEI is often implemented within existing institutional structures through **policy change, workforce diversity strategies, and inclusion training.** It seeks to make current systems more equitable and representative.
- Indigenization and decolonization seek to **fundamentally transform** institutional practices by integrating Indigenous ways of knowing, challenging colonial assumptions, and shifting power to Indigenous communities.

Leadership and Knowledge Systems

- DEI initiatives are generally **led by equity offices** or institutional policy bodies and influenced by human rights legislation.
- Indigenization must be **led by Indigenous peoples and communities**, grounded in relationality, cultural protocols, and Indigenous governance systems.

Accountability and Compliance

- DEI initiatives may be tied to **federal compliance requirements**, such as employment equity or Canada Research Chairs Program targets.
- Indigenization and decolonization align with obligations under **UNDRIP** and the **Truth and Reconciliation Commission**, often requiring deeper ethical and relational commitments.

While DEI and Indigenization/decolonization can reinforce one another, conflating them can risk erasing Indigenous-specific goals. Institutions are increasingly recognizing the importance of **treating Indigenization and decolonization as distinct priorities**, rather than subsuming them within generic DEI strategies.

Both frameworks support more just and inclusive education, but must be understood in **parallel**—not as interchangeable efforts.

AREA	DEI	INDIGENIZATION & DECOLONIZATION
Focus	All equity-deserving groups	Indigenous peoples and worldviews
Purpose	Remove systemic barriers in current structures	Transform colonial systems and restore Indigenous knowledge
Leadership	Often led by equity offices or HR	Must be led by Indigenous people and communities
Compliance Drivers	Human rights law, equity frameworks (e.g., DEI targets)	UNDRIP, TRC Calls to Action
Approach	Policy reform, training, representation	Cultural resurgence, land-based learning, community partnerships

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15. EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Organizational culture and employee engagement are increasingly recognized as strategic priorities across Canada's post-secondary institutions. Amid pressures such as budget constraints, shifting student expectations, and the demands of hybrid work, institutions must cultivate environments where staff and faculty feel valued, supported, and motivated to contribute to institutional success (Universities Canada, 2023).

However, persistent challenges – such as silos between academic and administrative units, unclear leadership communication, and limited recognition or career development opportunities – can lead to disengagement, low morale, and burnout. Strengthening engagement and fostering inclusive, responsive institutional cultures is essential for attracting and retaining talent and delivering high-quality education and research outcomes (Canadian Association of University Teachers [CAUT], 2023).

New Strategies

Culture Assessments and Employee Feedback Mechanisms

- Many institutions are using culture audits, engagement surveys, and employee listening sessions to assess the health of their organizational culture and identify areas for improvement. For example, McMaster University's *Employee Experience Survey* collects feedback on workplace culture, inclusion, recognition, and communication, leading to responsive action planning (McMaster University, 2023).

Values-Driven Leadership and Communication

- Embedding institutional values into leadership practices and internal communication has been shown to improve engagement. The University of Calgary's *Eyes High Strategy* reinforces purpose and vision through collaborative goal-setting and regular leadership dialogues (University of Calgary, 2023).

Recognition and Wellness Programs

- Employee recognition initiatives and wellness supports contribute to a positive culture. Dalhousie University offers an integrated wellness program and peer recognition platform that encourages collegial appreciation and holistic well-being (Dalhousie University, 2023).

Professional Development and Career Pathways

- Providing growth opportunities is critical for engagement. The University of Toronto's *Excellence through Innovation* initiative links learning and development to job satisfaction and internal mobility, especially among administrative staff (University of Toronto, 2023).

Case Study: George Brown College's People Strategy

George Brown College launched a *People Strategy* to enhance employee engagement by aligning human resources, leadership, wellness, and DEI with organizational priorities. Developed through extensive consultation, the strategy includes targeted initiatives in manager training, psychological safety, and recognition. Early evaluations show improvements in workplace trust and cross-departmental collaboration (George Brown College, 2023).



Case Study: Toronto Metropolitan University's Culture Transformation Project

Toronto Metropolitan University initiated a multi-year culture transformation project focused on building a workplace grounded in equity, respect, and trust. The initiative involved culture mapping, trauma-informed leadership development, and a university-wide engagement framework to co-create desired cultural values (TMU, 2022).

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CONCLUSION

The traditional approaches to managing workforce challenges in Canada's post-secondary sector are no longer enough. Institutions must embrace innovative and inclusive strategies— such as hybrid work integration, leadership succession planning, and culturally grounded Indigenization efforts – to remain competitive and responsive.

By investing in employee engagement, leveraging digital tools, and embedding equity, diversity, and decolonization across all levels of the institution, colleges and universities can strengthen organizational culture, attract and retain top talent, and better serve diverse student populations. What bold step could your post-secondary institution take today to build a more sustainable and inclusive future?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



NJ Global Consulting (NJGC) is a diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEI-B) firm, headquartered in Toronto, serving clients across Canada and globally. All our services are customized to your specific organizational needs. We provide products to support our diverse client base, and are specialized in providing trainings and workshops geared towards your audience, building DEI-B strategic plans, conducting policy and document reviews through a

DEI-B lens and creating workplace surveys (and analyzing results) so that you are able to make better, data-driven decisions. Please visit www.nafeesajalal.com for more about us, and reach out to book a free consultation today.

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