

# Unpacking the Scarborough Charter: A Dialogue with Karima Hashmani

by Eva Cupchik

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In early 2023, I conducted a virtual interview with Ms. Karima Hashmani, former Executive Director of Equity Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Toronto, and convener of the Scarborough Charter on Anti-Black Racism and Black Inclusion in Canadian Higher Education: Principles, Actions, and Accountabilities. Convened in 2021 and signed by more than forty universities, the Scarborough Charter represents a landmark commitment by institutions of higher education in Canada aimed at combatting anti-Black racism. The Charter is the result of extensive dialogue involving academic institutions, Black Communities, leaders, and activists. This collaboration centres anti-Black racism in Canadian higher education through concrete actions to ensure institutional accountabilities that can foster change.

Karima Hashmani has played a key role in the development and convening of the Charter. Her anti-racism and anti-oppression work spans education, international and community development, social housing, human rights, equity, diversity, and inclusion. Over the past twelve years Ms. Hashmani has supported non-profit organizations, immigrant communities, and youth with their experiences of anti-racism in her local community in Toronto, Canada. At the University of Toronto Scarbor-

ough campus, she was the Director of EDI, working alongside Principal Wisdom Tettey. Ms. Hashmani then became Executive Director of EDI at the University of Toronto (St. George, Mississauga, and Scarborough campuses) where she oversaw the offices of Sexual and Gender Diversity, Indigenous Initiatives, Accessibility, and Anti-Racism. As part of her role as EDI Executive Director at the University of Toronto, Ms. Hashmani co-convened the National Dialogues conference, a series of national forums on equity and inclusion in Canadian post-secondary education held virtually in October 2020. She also served as co-convener of the Scarborough Charter (2021). Ms. Hashmani presently occupies the role of Chief Inclusion Officer at Metrolinx, an agency of the Government of Ontario (Metrolinx 2024), which supports the coordination and integration of transportation in both the Greater Toronto Area and Hamilton.

My dialogue with Ms. Hashmani engages a feminist open-ended approach, positing my subject position as a queer and Ashkenazi Jewish-identified cisgendered woman and Ms. Hashmani's personal intersections, which are South Asian from Tanzania, Muslim-identified, mother, and community member. Her intersections remain central in guiding the interview's practice of critic-

ally theorizing equity, diversity, and inclusion, and beckons the call to interrogate 'not only who we are, but how are we in the doing' (Abolson 2011). My conversation with Ms. Hashmani occurred over a recorded Zoom session. Using Zoom captioned transcription services, I edited the longform dialogue to distinguish key themes in relation to the Scarborough Charter.

In organising the resulting text, I distributed themes according to our conversation's flow to demonstrate a feminist non-hierarchical framework. The discussion centered on Ms. Hashmani's role in the Charter's original conceptualization and its foundations. The interview navigated origins of the Scarborough Charter, its rhetorical intentions, institutional reception, as well as Ms. Hashmani's reflections on diversity and inclusion programs within Canadian universities.

## **Scarborough Charter Origins and National Dialogues on Anti-Black Racism**

**Eva Cupchik (EC):** How do you identify yourself?

**Karima Hashmani (KH):** I'm South Asian, but from East Africa, from Tanzania. I'm also cisgendered, Muslim, and a mom. So, lots of intersecting identities happening every day. Taking on these roles around equity, is a huge responsibility to ensure that you're checking yourself all the time around your own biases, and how you come into a room, and take up space. Self-identifying is important.

**EC:** I am wondering if you can offer some background on the origins of the Scarborough Charter. What can you share about the National Dialogues conference?

**KH:** After the death of George Floyd [May 2020], this is when universities were really being responsive to what is happening in our communities. And how we responded was important, to illustrate how what's happening in the world impacts people, especially Black identifying folks. So, at that point, Wisdom Tettey [Principal of the University of Toronto at Scarborough] and I had a conversation, asking, what do we need? We were already responding as an institution.

We were creating spaces for Black communities, but also for allies, in terms of our collective responsibility, in having healing spaces for individuals, and what that looks like and feels like for students, staff, and faculty. We

already knew what the problems were. We are in a different time, in a different place. And this is an equity person's dream; there is systemic anti-Black racism in our institutions, in our society. And what can we, as colleges and universities do? How do we create actions?

In October 2020, for the National Dialogues conference, we convened students, staff, and faculty communities. We were interested in the challenges and barriers that exist. What does that look like in terms of our principles as institutions? What are those values at the core? What actions are needed in relation to those values? And then, how do we keep ourselves accountable? Those are essential things, in our teaching and learning, in our community engagement practices, in governance.

For the Scarborough Charter's virtual conference, we convened across Canada for two days. The first day was about understanding, knowing, and pushing the agenda for looking at best practices. And the second day was really about actions. We were interested in the options that we needed to create a charter. We wanted to hear different experiences right across the country. Where are the gaps? What are the actions that people want to see happen? The National Dialogues conference was a great way for connecting Black communities across senior leaders and administrators. It was exciting to see the commitment, whether it was universities or colleges that were addressing systemic anti-Black racism, but also in their fostering Black inclusion.

**EC:** Were the National Dialogues an academic conference where people gave papers or panels? Or was it strategically designed to have a dialogue about the anticipated Scarborough Charter?

**KH:** We had a focus on research: what are the barriers that Black researchers face? Then we had a section concerning non-Black folks, asking, "So, what is your responsibility? Where can you sponsor? Where can you mentor? Where can you provide access and spaces?" And then there was a community engagement piece where we had community development organizations that were Black identifying who came to the table to say: this is what we need. So, it was a good cross-section of what we were looking for in terms of hearing from individuals on the ground, in the community, and in our academic settings. Black student associations across many organizations also joined in consultations.

**EC:** I'm interested in the concept of inclusion. I think we need to separate the concepts of equity, diversity, and inclusion, to engage with each one and their relations, but also perceive how they are uniquely different. The Scarborough Charter, as you express is directed toward Black excellence and inclusion. Which identity intersections fall within the Charter's directed audience?

**KH:** The focus of the Charter was to support Black identifying individuals with intersecting identities, including Indigenous self-identifying students who may also identify as Black. We had an organizational committee at the University of Toronto, for example, with students, staff, and faculty who helped convene and create what those two days looked like. It was a collaborative effort. We also had phenomenal commitment for national committee action. There were lots of great conversations around data and ensuring that we're thinking about indigeneity, rethinking Canadian history and making sure that's a pivotal thing we speak to within the Charter.

**EC:** The Scarborough Charter did not emerge from a constitutional amendment, but from consultation with volunteer partnering communities. It must have been labour intensive for participants to share and record their ideas in a virtual space, requiring emotional, physical, and cognitive energy. Did you find yourselves engaged in challenging dialogues?

**KH:** I do not feel like they were challenging, but rather, really engaging conversations about various ways to represent information. What would the Scarborough Charter look and feel like? We needed to ensure it resonated with faculty, students, and staff. We wanted to make sure people saw themselves in this document. And then ask does the Scarborough Charter hold institutions accountable?

[Professor]Adelle Blackett was the person who helped draft the Charter, and she had a drafting committee engage in the process. Conversations that led up to the drafting were important. We also held consultations within our own institutions, which are really core. I had lots of conversations with students, with staff, with academics, with different bodies, to ensure continuity with University of Toronto's values.

**EC:** To summarize, for the convening portion of the Scarborough Charter's origins, there was university level consultation, student participation, national level dia-

logues, and senior leadership deliberation within the university. Could the Charter have been otherwise envisioned?

**KH:** We wanted to be informed by many different perspectives, where people come to the table and speak to barriers, through their lived experiences. What do we need to be doing to ensure we're addressing anti-Black racism and fostering Black inclusion? The National Dialogues necessarily led to the Charter's drafting. We consulted with the University of Toronto's Anti-Racism Task Force which had students, staff, and faculty, as part of our Scarborough Charter conversation (Bulgin 2021).

The University of Toronto Scarborough is bustling with students who are excited to be there. There are many Black and Indigenous spaces within the campus, fostering inclusive excellence. And it's such a good place to experiment and create charters like this Scarborough Charter.

## Signing of the Scarborough Charter

**EC:** Universities and colleges are incentivized to sign the Scarborough Charter. What do you think is the weight of these signatures? Do you think these may be perceived as operating on a symbolic level, as public relations? Do you think there may be issues about their level of sincerity in funding change-making programs that support equity, diversity, and inclusion?

**KH:** My hope is that institutions that have signed the Charter are committed to addressing anti-Black racism, beyond public relations. Signing the Charter references accountability; however, your institution can embody the Charter in their commitment to inclusion. I think institutions have signed on, committed to moving the needle about what it means to foster Black Excellence or address challenges and systemic barriers. The system needs to be unravelled and rethought if we want to bolster our governance structures and commitments to learning and teaching. I think there is a commitment to change for Scarborough Charter university signatories.

## Pathways to Accessible Education

**EC:** I recognize the Scarborough Charter is nonbinding, without legal implications. However, there is potential for the Charter to impact university and government anti-Black racism policy, and institutional commitments

that improve accessible education for equity deserving groups. Is it possible that bridging the gap between access to education and the Scarborough Charter accelerates inclusivity?

**KH:** There are pieces in the Charter that speak specifically to access. How are we embedding access to education into our education from grade school? Are we creating pathways for access opportunities? My parents didn't have a formal education, access, or opportunity, so navigating education for me was different. I'm passionate about creating access and opportunity for students that allows for changing someone's outlook on life, in terms of poverty for people who live around our campuses, and in social housing. Pathways to accessible education create a different avenue for individuals to thrive from within the institution. People need to feel like they belong; they need to feel like there are spaces where they can connect and engage. There needs to be opportunities for Black alumni and racialized folks to share their experiences with individuals and create opportunities. That 'pathways' piece is critical to get folks into our campuses, within an anchor institution. Community organizations in the Scarborough area are critical to create access and opportunities for Black students on campus to thrive.

Are universities supporting wraparound services for under-served communities, in collaboration with community partners and connecting organizations? How are institutions doing right by their recruitment process, through engaging neighbourhood schools and eliminating barriers to accessing education?

**EC:** How did the University of Toronto respond to the Scarborough Charter's recommendations?

**KH:** The University of Toronto was very responsive and engaged in conversations around the Scarborough Charter and the Anti-Black Racism Task Force that proposed fifty-six recommendations from consulting students, staff, and faculty lived experiences (Bulgin 2021). How are we creating those pathways and opportunities for graduate students to even pursue education? Institutions that promote the Scarborough Charter are committed to doing this work, in creating these avenues for access and opportunity. Partnering with community organizations can help with advancement, student opportunities, scholarships, bursaries, and fellowships.

## Black Diaspora Identities

**EC:** Black experiences are varied and can also be informed by religious identity, diverse global roots, and experiences that are not firmly oppositional to Whiteness. How do you embody a diasporic identity and how does it inform your work?

**KH:** Black identity is just not one thing. There is continental Africa, and Caribbean identity. There are so many different identities within the Black community, which is interesting for me to witness. It is important to hear, to listen, to engage. I think there are many things your identity and lived experience can bring to bear on your work. My own personal lived experience includes being from parents who are immigrants to Canada. My parents did not have access to formal education back home, after grade eight. There is a different reality for children of immigrant families, where you come to Canada having experienced discrimination. How do you feel like you belong, whether it's in your community or within society at large? Equity, diversity, and inclusion are different but interrelated concepts. It is really the equity piece that's critical to understanding a history of colonization. What does it mean to be from an equity deserving community? How do you feel like you belong around those tables? What is your role to create a sense of belonging for others?

## Allyship and Lending Privileges

**EC:** It is critical not to reify binaries, white/Black, queer/heterosexual. White-passing experiences can also emerge for Black identifying communities. When doing cross-cultural research, what does it mean to embody allyship? What does allyship mean for you?

**KH:** I think allyship is critical to accessible education work. I don't think one community can do it all on their own. They need people to lend their privilege toward creating spaces of opportunity, access, and sponsorship, fostering a sense of belonging. How does our education hold us to account with representation on hiring committees, in terms of student/staff recruitment and retention strategies? How do we create spaces where there's career development or progression, and opportunities for individuals? How do university 'student life' staff members create spaces for Black students? These are systemic issues that have existed long before we got here. At the end of the day, how are you lending your privilege as an ally?

**EC:** Is there a final note on your thoughts on the Scarborough Charter drafting experience or equity, diversity, and inclusion that you'd like to leave with *Atlantis* readers?

**KH:** The Scarborough Charter is a hopeful forward-looking document that is really grounded in our principles, our values, and on how we're accountable in addressing anti-Black racism. This is not work that can be done with one Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion office. The whole institution needs to be impactful through research, teaching, and learning. It speaks to all those pieces that are really core to institutions.

### **Conclusion: Where do we go from here?**

An outstanding query from my dialogue with Ms. Hashmani was whether universities will be held accountable in their reporting inclusivity (EDI) data to an inter-governmental council. Further, it is unclear whether university senior leadership reports will be subject to vetting by yearly review from the Inter-institutional Steering Committee on Inclusive Higher Education, set out in section 5.1, that retains public council recommendations on structural inclusivity and concrete policy revisions. An important takeaway includes how discussions about equity are critical to decolonizing universities. Hashmani asserts that grassroots pathways to education are critical for universities to honour and enable accessible diversity mandates. University priorities therefore cannot promote recruitment without inclusive strategies for retaining under-represented international and domestic students.

She suggests universities can outreach to high schools across urban and rural landscapes, including Indigenous communities, while creating bridge programs for prospective learners who demonstrate creative potential outside of standard entrance pathways. Moreover, orchestrating dynamic in-person and online teaching platforms may be a funded anchor of inclusive pedagogy across disciplines, thus balancing the Scarborough Charter equity principles with creative learning. Engaging students about their learning journeys, is a means through which universities can echo the Scarborough Charter pathways toward accessible education. Scarborough Charter institutional uptake is a process that requires meaningful ongoing consultation with students, parents, faculty, university staff, and their broader communities of care.

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