Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice
Issue 45.1 (2024)
Special Issue: **Dialogues and Reflections: The Scarborough Charter**
Interview

Anti-Black Racism and the Signing of the Scarborough Charter: Insights, Processes, Challenges, and Inclusive Futures in Canadian Higher Education.
An Interview with Dr. Adelle Blackett and Dr. Wisdom Tettey

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Keywords: Scarborough Charter; anti-Black racism; Canadian higher education; inclusive excellence

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On November 18, 2021, forty-six universities and colleges across Canada signed the Scarborough Charter on anti-Black racism and Black inclusion in Canadian Higher Education: Principles Actions and Accountabilities[1] pledging to fight anti-Black racism and to promote Black inclusion. This Charter represents one of the most significant documents in the history of modern Canadian higher education in its collective, concrete plan of action to specifically address historical and structural issues related to anti-Black racism in institutions of higher learning. These actions include redressing Black underrepresentation among faculty, staff, and students as well as decolonising curricular offerings, teaching and learning, and knowledge production, and in particular representing Black traditions of excellence.

The following conversation with two of the stewards of the Scarborough Charter, Dr. Adelle Blackett, Canada Research Chair in Transnational Labour Law & Development, McGill University (Principal drafter of the Scarborough Charter) and Dr. Wisdom Tettey, Vice-President & Principal, University of Toronto-Scarborough and incoming President of Carleton University as of January 2025 (who spearheaded the initiative, co-convened the Dialogues with Karima Hashmani, Director, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion at UTSC, and served as Chair of the Inter-Institutional Advisory Committee[2]), offers some significant insights into the drafting and implementation of the Charter. This interview provides an opportunity to learn more about the grassroots history and background of the Charter. Our dialogue explores the context, spirit, and various facets of this living document. Moving forward from the fundamentals of the Charter, we ask how universities and colleges will stay accountable and committed to the Charter's bold vision, novel notions, decolonizing principles, and purposeful language.

Christiana Abraham (CA): What was the impetus and the grounding ideology (or ideologies) behind the landmark Scarborough Charter within Canadian higher education in 2021?

Wisdom Tettey (WT): On behalf of Adelle and myself and the larger steering committee, thanks for this opportunity. In terms of history, I think we cannot talk about the Charter without going back to the National Dialogues that gave birth to it.[3] We had gone through, at the University of Toronto at Scarborough, a process of fashioning out a strategic plan at the heart of which was a commitment to inclusion, in particular Black inclusion and Indigenous inclusion. And then around the same time, the world was awoken to the reality of what Black people experience every day; it was made visible in 2020

as things were unfolding in the United States with George Floyd's murder and people waking up to the fact that this thing that Black people experience every day is real. As institutions issued statements, there was a sense of these reactions being a repeat of the regular cycle that we go through. We issue statements to give us a sense of cathartic release, we feel good about it, and then we move on.

And so, because we had made a commitment as part of our strategic plan to convene National Dialogues on these issues of equity and inclusion, these developments gave us the impetus to mobilize people around this moment—people we know who are committed to these same issues—and as a sector to have related conversations. This led to the convening of the National Dialogues and that year we decided to focus on anti-Black racism and Black inclusion. Subsequently, we focused on other areas such as disability and accessibility. And because we all have our networks of people who we know are doing the heavy lifting in different spaces, we reached out and it was really heartwarming to have people say, "Absolutely, this is important."

At these dialogues, we heard very loud and clear from the 3,000 participants, including some 60 partner institutions, that we didn't want just another conversation that ended up making people feel good in the moment, with no substantive change.

This is where the push for a Charter came from. We've all fought for this work as individuals but, in order to move this, we needed institutions to own this. And we had the fortune of having someone of Adelle Blackett's calibre on the Inter-Institutional Advisory Committee who was willing to lead that effort. She, as principal drafter, pulled together a group of colleagues who were a subset of the advisory committee to move us through this process. I thought it was important to set the context because I think people assume this just emerged out of nowhere. There's a backstory to it.

It was imperative for us that we stayed true to the principles and the values that undergird this work while making sure that we're able to bring as many people onboard as possible. We made a conscious decision that we were not going to lower the barrier to entry in a way that makes signing on to the initiative perfunctory. There had to be a solid manifestation of commitment in order to be part of this. Signing is just the easy part. The work that needs to be done is the more challenging part. And that is where we need concrete commitment.

Adelle Blackett (AB): Thank you, Christiana and Rohini, for the singular opportunity to speak to the Scarborough Charter initiative and thank you Wisdom for setting the stage. I'm also going to dial back to when I participated in the National Dialogues including the preparatory meeting. Present were concerned members of our communities from across the country, not only senior university and college administrators but of course academics broadly, staff members, and students who engaged very meaningfully alongside alumni and even some folks who would go on to become chancellors, just a wide range of people who cared very deeply about moving beyond statements on anti-Black racism toward action. I recalled asking right at the outset about how, beyond dialogue, we could build in concrete, lasting mechanisms to foster transformative change. Undergirding the initiative is recognition that the history of Black presence in Canada needs to be acknowledged and situated, and it needs to be a basis on which action is taken. In this regard, the federally-acknowledged UN Decade for People of African Descent was important.

In addition to the racial reckoning following George Floyd's murder, forcing so many to look again and to see the depth of anti-Black racism, there was also a broad commitment to thinking seriously about our collective histories. This includes of course the history of Indigenous dispossession. It was important, therefore, that the initial Inter-institutional Advisory Committee included senior administrators from Indigenous communities, working collaboratively to convey shared understandings and solidarities in the spirit of mutuality. Mutuality is one of the core principles of the Scarborough Charter.

I would add that we had a keen awareness of the importance of higher education access and what could be done in the university context to actually move us to a place where we could be seen as embracing the need to address anti-Black racism in concrete measures and across the many aspects of life in the higher education sector. Hence, the Scarborough Charter focuses on governance, on research, on teaching and learning, as well as on community involvement. I think that kind of captures the way in which we understood the imperative of action, guided by some core principles. The core influence for us has been to keep our attention on what needs to be done for change to be transformative.

Rohini Bannerjee (RB): What was the process for bringing together such a dynamic team of Charter drafters from across the Canadian higher education landscape?

WT: We recognized the importance and value of bringing the right people together, so that this was not just a cobbling together of anyone, and we remembered that in that moment that there were a lot of performative things going on. We wanted to make sure that the criteria for engaging people were anchored in a solid record of commitment to this work, not just having a bandwagon effect where people think it is the next cool thing to be part of.

We also wanted to make sure that we had representation across the college and university sectors. We wanted to make sure that faculty, staff, and students were represented and those voices were part of it. A lot of times when we talk about these issues, we tend to tilt in the direction of students and faculty and we forget that, within our context, staff are probably among the most marginalized of the marginalized. Making sure that their voices were heard in this, and that they were able to help shape the direction, was important. We wanted to ensure there was geographical diversity as well. We're a bilingual country and so we wanted to make sure that is also reflected.

And even within the Black community, which was always going to be the majority of this group, we wanted to make sure that the diversity of the community was reflected within our group. Making sure that voices that represent the 2SLGBTQIA+ communities were there, making sure that gender is publicly represented, all of those pieces were part of the consideration. But we also wanted to make sure that this was not a burden for just Black people, that we owned this as a responsibility of the whole sector. So non-Black allies who have a record of championing this work were brought into this space as well. There's a lot of commonality between the Black community's experience and Indigenous communities. There's a lot for us to learn from the experience of Indigenous colleagues and we wanted to draw on their experiences and their expertise and bring that to bear on the work. So, we had representation from Indigenous colleagues on this body. I think this gives you some sense of what it was like trying to pull all of these folks together.

As you all know, there's a lot of work that happens at the grassroots but this work is not able to find its way into spaces that would elicit the kind of responses that would make us move forward. So, in addition to the people who are doing the work on the front lines, we needed to bring institutions on board. And the numbers that you see in terms of signatories [to the Charter] reflect a lot of the behind-the-scenes work that was done to bring people on board. One of the things we wanted to make clear was that this initiative was not to be "hijacked" by institutions as their thing. But they are, nevertheless, going to be part of the solution and there was space for them to be part of this. We wanted to make sure that distinction was clear. So, members of the steering committee came in their individual capacities based on their record of similar work.

We can get into the work of being able to get institutions on board and Adelle can share with you some of the dynamics between different geographies and how these things were received in different spaces, but I hope this gives you some sense of that work of pulling people together. These are people with a record, a dedication, and a passion for this work who are not going to be cowed by the structural and systemic challenges that exist. But we were also not going to get people off the hook by making this just Black people's responsibility to move change.

AB: If I may, I'll just offer a bit of a timeline because I think there's so much there and you can see the wealth of insight into the work that went into making this Scarborough Charter more than a piece of paper. But I think what your question is getting at is the vision of co-creation in respect of drafting, right, because co-creation also extends beyond the drafting process to making the Scarborough Charter a truly living document within our institutions. And that's really crucial.

All of the stakeholders whom Wisdom has mentioned were convened during the first in the series of National Dialogues and Action that took place on October 1 & 2, 2020. Remembering that time and that moment, there were panelists, and in our virtual world of 2020, many people were listening intently but were not quite visible to the panelists. They were able to submit feedback subsequently and notes were taken from the various panel discussions. There were also powerful keynotes on our histories, including by Barrington Walker, and that kind of set the tone and of course there was a keynote by Wisdom that underscored that equity is deserved. The bullet point notes from those conversations, many of them happening simultaneously, became part of the record that informed the drafting in the spirit of co-creation.

About a month after the National Dialogues and Action, Wisdom reached out to me and said, "Hey, you know, you might like to join this steering committee." It's like, well, here we are, we might want to draft a charter. So, sure!

I was introduced to the other steering committee members, and we had maybe a two-hour conversation about the potential content of the Scarborough Charter. I appreciated the receptivity to my suggestion that we think about what would enable members of Black communities to thrive, to really flourish, and I welcomed a particularly helpful reflection from Mike DeGagné on lessons from the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

And I'll say this (because it was funny), Wisdom said, "It should take about three hours." Okay!

So, our team of four—Ananya Mukherjee Reid, then provost and vice-president at University of British Columbia (Okanagan Campus), Marie-Claude Rigaud (who had to leave the team and her position as Special Advisor and Associate Secretary General, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion and Indigenous Relations, Université de Montréal in May 2021 to take up an appointment as a Québec Superior Court Justice), Barrington Walker, then Associate Vice-President, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, Wilfrid Laurier University, and I—got together along with a two-person drafting support team, Natalie Elisha, then Equity Projects Specialist at University of Toronto, and Rena Prashad, Senior Project Specialist at University of Toronto Scarborough.

We had a series of meetings before the end-of-year holidays that were mainly discussions of broad themes, building on the notes that were shared from the National Dialogues, and built an initial content outline. But it was pretty clear that someone needed to take the pen and build a framework, an architecture, and, yes, crystallize a vision for how institutions of higher education could, through principle, actions, and accountabilities, embark on a collective action process through which the important initiatives of each could collectively become greater than the sum of its parts. So instead of working on my book on slavery and the law, drafting the Charter became my first sabbatical project for the 2021 calendar year. So that was the role that I played. The first draft went back to the Inter-Institutional Advisory Committee members for comments, then to the broader community for input, and I drafted further revisions that sought to be responsive in the face of the wide array of feedback—most of which was encouraging and constructive. And I was very touched, if somewhat reluctant, when members of the Inter-Institutional Advisory Committee supported Dr. Malinda Smith's recommendation that I be formally recognized as the Principal Drafter of the Scarborough Charter.

CA: In November of 2021, more than forty universities from across Canada signed on to the Scarborough Charter in an incredibly touching ceremony of its official launch. What did this momentous occasion represent to you? And what about those universities that opted to wait until an action list was in place?

AB: Thank you, Christiana, for those words about the Charter and the launch. There's so much hope and so much aspiration that remains. It's very helpful just to remember, okay, this text, this launch was meaningful for framing why we needed action and why it was so powerful to have such a significant number of leading members of academia, universities, and colleges stand with us and insist on the importance of the principles, the actions, and the accountability. I actually pulled up what I said at the launch because I wanted to bring myself back to the moment. I had strict instructions to speak within four minutes, so I spoke fast.

As I often do, I invoked C.L.R. James, his insistence in *Beyond a Boundary* ([1963] 2013) on the importance of movement, not where you are, what you have, but where you have come from, where you're going, and the rate at which you're getting there.

I exhorted our higher education leaders who had signed onto the Scarborough Charter and members of our communities to focus on continuous, steadfast movement toward achieving Scarborough Charter principles.

And also, there was a caution. And you know what they say, right? You provide a lot of praise and then people remember the caution…. We need to focus on the *how*, we can't be playing at equity. So again, invoking James' cricket metaphor: we need to actually be achieving equity and we certainly should pay attention to the *how* to ensure that the movement is undertaken with our communities' meaningful participation. So, I concluded that we should avoid EDI with a vengeance. And that's somehow what people remembered, probably because folks have lived what it feels like to have equity done "to" you rather than "with and for" you. And so there was an

insistence on *nothing about us without us* as part of moving this forward with care and with love for justice.

WT: I'll just add in terms of how we brought institutions to the table. We thought it was important that these institutions are able to back up what they claim they're doing. And this is a mechanism to make sure that when they sign on to this, they're signing on to a set of commitments. They're not just signing something as a passing phase, in this moment of reckoning; it is something that endures.

There was a lot of back and forth, mostly about reassuring institutions that we understand that there are different categories of institutions that have unique internal contexts that are relevant to their own way of doing things. What we asked of them was to go back and work with their communities to make sure that when this is endorsed it commits the whole institution. That is why the piece about institutional commitment, and therefore obligation, is important, because if you have only Black caucuses on campuses doing this work, they don't have the power to move these things forward.

It was necessary for the highest level of institutional leadership to sign on behalf of the institution, having this be part of their commitment. And it would also go beyond the individual leader at any moment in time, so this is an institutional commitment. But we also wanted to make sure this commitment comes from the grassroots as well. So, a number of institutions went to their communities. And I can tell you that even among Black caucuses in particular institutions, there were differences in engagement because we have, as institutions, historically not been trustworthy as far as members of our community are concerned. People didn't want to be used as props to make institutions feel good. And so there were really robust conversations within particular institutions about whether or not they should endorse this going forward. The other piece of it was working with institutions in Québec, which had their own challenges, and that has some implications for the number of institutions in Quebec that signed on.

And as I said at the beginning, the threshold was relatively high. Even as we understood that the Charter will be operationalized at each institutional based on their particular contexts, it did not take away the fundamental principles and commitments that were necessary to move this forward. I think those pieces are important to keep in mind; this was not all smooth sailing.

We were supported by Universities Canada to work within its own process and structures to bring this to the table. We worked with the Parliamentary Black Caucus, who were supportive as well, and in places outside of academia, just making sure we were able to tap into the power centres as that will have implications for spaces inside of academia, for example the tri-agency,[4] the three federal research-funding agencies in Canada. The college sector had its own dynamics that we had to navigate. That explains, in part, why the number of signatories from that sector are relatively low.

A major factor was the readiness of different institutions to move at particular points in time. And I want to make this point because I think sometimes people look at who signed that day and assume that those who didn't sign were not committed. It wasn't necessarily the case at all. And you know, Rohini you would know this, with your own institution there were thoughtful, methodical approaches to making sure that this was owned collectively before signing on. And so, the process of co-creation did not just happen at this Charter steering-committee level. It was also about co-creation within particular institutions. I think sometimes people just look at who was in at the beginning and say, well, it means people were not committed. In some cases, people wanted to make sure this was done and done right.

RB: Why do you believe there are so few French-language universities signing onto the Charter at this stage?

WT: A lot of it was political. Those institutions that signed up were saying, "We have a role as higher-education institutions to be leaders, not to fold in the face of potential resistance." I work in a space where I understand the dynamics of politics and the implications for leaders and how they make some of these decisions.

I spoke to a large number of institutions in Québec, and I appreciate the challenges that they were dealing with. We had always said that this is not a one-time thing, and we are happy to work with folks to bring them along as things went through. We needed to be understanding of the challenges that people were dealing with. But we were not then going to lower the threshold to the level of those who were going to do what is convenient. It is to say, we are always going to be setting the standards high, but we'll work with you to bring you along into that picture. But we have absolutely no authority to impose this on any institution.

It is particularly important that people were able to mobilize from within these institutions to push institutional leaders and ask them the question, "Why are we not reflected in this space if this is in fact important to us?" I want to be able to acknowledge the work that people did from the grassroots to get institutional leaders [on board] because not all of those who signed up were necessarily ready to sign up. I think Adelle can speak about the particular Québec context because a lot of work has been done.

AB: Almost sixty signatories to the Charter, as we speak, is a significant number, including a significant number of U15 institutions.[5] However, there are a lot of institutions that haven't signed and so when we zoom into Québec, the number of signatories in relation to the whole is not huge. The CÉGEP college network in Québec, which involves two to three years of post-secondary study after high school ends at grade 11 and is completed before entering what are typically 3-year undergraduate university programs in Québec, is very significant. But I think it's fair to say that we are at the very beginning of outreach to CÉGEPs at that level. I said there's a before and after and I meant it, especially for institutions across the country and including in Québec that had not really been engaging with anti-Black racism. This was for many a starting point. And so if you understand change as very much kind of holistic and largely bottom up, those movements are happening now.

Increasingly (and I've been teaching in Québec for almost 25 years), it's kind of now that I'm hearing from some of my colleagues in some of these institutions that are having panels that are addressing anti-Black racism or EDI more generally, where I'm seeing people from racialized communities and, in particular, folks whose origins are in francophone, West and Central African, taking space and addressing these issues, including in official EDI-type positions. But this is relatively new. We've seen the first Black chancellor at a university in Québec, Anglophone or Francophone, Franz Saintellemy, at Université de Montréal. There's no one in Wisdom's position of leadership in the university sector at the moment.

WT: You felt the pause, right? That is the reality. Right?

AB: I believe there are folks who are change-makers. While I think it's important to ask the question about French-language institutions, it's also really important to contextualize and to keep working at meaningful inclusion, which is why the Scarborough Charter and its principles and the actions that are asked of folks are all significant: the starting point has changed beyond institutional names on a list.

The other piece, and I think Wisdom started to touch on this, takes us a little bit back to the grounding philosophy of this instrument. The preamble sets out the broad regulatory context, the importance of international human rights principles, our Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and provincial and territorial human rights legislation. In other words, the Scarborough Charter is a part of a broad enabling framework for action. Institutions like universities and colleges have particular human rights responsibilities. The Scarborough Charter helps to provide guidance but there's a broader regulatory framework that all universities and colleges need to respect. I think that by fostering this deepened understanding we support institutions of higher education to be part of the steadfast movement, as well, of course, as working closely with the tri-agency, unions, and other sector actors who play a major role in how we understand, live, and move forward on equity.

RB: Thank you very, very much.

CA: How do you feel about the way in which the Charter has been received? Are you seeing movements toward concrete and measurable actions that actually make a difference?

WT: The only thing I would add is that people are just amazed at how we are able to bring institutions together for common purpose here. Most people look at this and go, "We've got about a hundred members of Universities Canada; you look at Colleges and Institutes Canada[6] and they've got, you know, dozens of members, and we've only got about sixty?" Right? But even internally within institutions, it's not easy to find common ground, let alone across the sector and across the country. So I think all of us who are involved in this work sometimes need to remind ourselves about what has been achieved, even though what is left to be done is huge. This work can be daunting, and it helps to have a sense of proportionality and relativity compared to where we were and where we are. I think it's important to put it in context as well. The commitment to making sure that we are going on this journey together is laudable. One of our colleagues who was a part of the steering committee, you know,

Gervan Fearon, who is president of George Brown College, reminds us that we should look at this as a ramp and that people are at different stages and we can all collectively help one another along. And I think this goes back to the point I was making about recognizing that we are not all going to leap to the same height at the same time. But the commitment to making sure that we are all mutually supportive is important. So, the principle of mutuality is not just in relation to the external but it's also within and how we build common purpose.

AB: The biennial conferences, the first of which took place at the University of British Columbia, alongside Simon Fraser University, offer a really wonderful opportunity to put the movement of the Scarborough Charter front and centre and to enable the kind of dialogue among institutions that this initiative is premised on. What we need to see increasingly as we develop the reporting mechanisms is that each institutional actor is able to explain the actions that they are taking that are context-specific and provide the necessary qualitative and quantitative data on implementation. Actors should also have the opportunity to engage with each other, discuss challenges, and to push each other in meaningful and constructive ways through a process that is built on that mutuality, doing together and with our communities what it would be harder and indeed less desirable to try to sustain alone.

RB: One of the original aspects of the Scarborough Charter is the novel language about Black inclusion and Black excellence that it introduces into the vernacular. Can you elaborate on the origins and meanings of some of this language and their implications for thinking about the place of Blackness in the Canadian academy?

AB: As our drafting committee was honing the Scarborough Charter's key principles, there was an interesting discussion around inclusive excellence and alternative language of Black excellence. While Blackness is of course implicit, what we didn't want to do was suggest that there were different standards of excellence and that somehow Black excellence meant leaving the concept of excellence itself somehow untouched. You'll see in the Scarborough Charter that there is a specific reference under inclusive excellence to Black traditions of research excellence and it was important to us to affirm a capacious understanding of knowledge traditions, pedagogical commitments, and leadership styles that help us to broaden our understanding of "excellence" through a commitment to inclusion. The framing of inclusive excellence is part of insisting on all of that. What do institutions of higher education mean when their vision of excellence is so narrow that most of the world is not even represented in it? What do we lose that makes us all less than excellent?

Some have framed this in other terms, that is, we're not truly excellent if we fail to be inclusive. So, it's a call for institutions to broaden and remove barriers to excellence.

Of course, inclusive excellence is one of the four principles. I suspect the principle that has probably resonated with many is Black flourishing, in part because it so clearly captures a vision of community that challenges and undermines a deficit model that has been pervasive. When you think about Black flourishing in relation to inclusive excellence, you really are capturing a vision that counters the pervasive historical exclusions and challenges institutional actors to be thinking much more systematically and much more ambitiously about what it is that they need to be doing to support transformative change. It draws in members of communities from across the African diaspora and shapes the kinds of claims that are made.

In this sense, mutuality has also been the basis of some capacious thinking. I couldn't agree more with Wisdom's comments about mutuality. Mutuality has been commented upon by Principal and Vice Chancellor Patrick Deane of Queen's University. He recognized that it is perhaps one of the most challenging principles because we tend to think about universities in a manner that rewards individualism and competitive achievement. Mutuality is very much a principle about how to be in relation with one another, including how to be in relation with the communities in which universities are embedded, certainly locally. And there is specific attention in the Scarborough Charter to Black communities locally as well as transnationally. I love that Deane emphasized the need for modesty and an ability to be "educated by the world beyond our confines."[7]

And so, there's really careful attention to what it means to be thinking seriously of a transformative movement on anti-Black racism through those principles. The accountability piece, reflecting the fourth principle, is everything. It is the movement. It is how signatory institutions are holding themselves accountable to the principles of the Charter, within their own institutions and

with the actors within and around them, vis à vis each of the other signatory institutions in the Inter-Institutional Forum,[8] and in relation to our societies that so depend on the higher education sector for the kind of intergenerational societal mobility and transformation we need. I would say that each principle is very much adopted because of its resonance and because of the meaning they collectively bring to how we understand the goal of transformation as affirmed in the preamble of the Scarborough Charter.

WT: I think there are two ways in which "Black excellence" was challenging within the existing ways of looking at excellence. It's a push to broaden our definition, which by extension is asking for institutions to move away from a myopic definition of excellence. The very definition of excellence is being challenged here. The other thing that this does (and you folks would have experienced it in different contexts) is it tends to dichotomize excellence and inclusion, where we look at them as somehow antithetical to each other.

Any time you talk about inclusion, it's almost like the next sentence will be, "Oh, you know, it's going to compromise excellence," It is challenging people to appreciate the fact that these things are, in fact, interrelated. A lot of times when people talk about creating space for others to come in, there's almost this unspoken perception that we have to diminish in order to include. And what we are saying is that those are very much intertwined because it allows you to draw on a broad range of excellence that you'd otherwise not be able to see or embrace or bring into the fold.

I think looking at it as challenging existing notions of what excellence means, being very clear that we're not in any way saying you have to compromise excellence in order to do this, but also challenging the notion of dichotomizing these things and turning them into binaries when in fact they're not, right? This critique undergirds the way that we've approached this issue, challenging our institutions to think differently. And in fact, it's ironic that institutions are the ones that are being myopic when we're supposed to be much more broad-minded as higher education institutions. But these systems and structures that claim to be open-minded are, in fact, the opposite. And we need to call ourselves out on these things and push ourselves to a different understanding and appreciation of the benefits of having a broader open mind about what excellence means in our communities.

CA: Thank you for this response but allow me to probe a bit into this critical aspect of the Charter that goes beyond mere language. How do we ensure that higher education hiring committees understand and implement "Black excellence" in its novel and contextual sense, as introduced by the Charter?

WT: Faculty associations have sometimes talked the talk but have not walked the walk when it comes to addressing these questions, particularly around cohort hiring. There's been a lot of push back by our own colleagues. And this is why the accountability pieces matter, and this is why it is important that universities sign and not individuals within institutions, because now governing councils or boards can hold the president accountable. The president needs to hold their vice-presidents accountable all the way through to deans and to chairs and so on. And it has to be not just about the people but our processes, our procedures, and making sure that we are changing those to reflect the direction that we are moving in. So, if a chair is making recommendations [we need to ask the following]: Is the Dean checking to make sure that the advertising was done in the right places? Has the hiring committee gone through a process of unlearning? Because we are products of our history and culture, we have to ask if there has been an intentional effort to make sure we are all learning and that we are held accountable within those milieux where we are having those conversations. Some of these things are not always just unconscious bias. Some of it is truly structural bias. So, if a Dean is really serious about this, they should make sure there is accountability. When a recommendation comes forward, we are not saying every hire has to result in a Black person, but you have to be able to make the case for why that is not the case. What have you done to make sure that the pool is inclusive, and the process is right?

I've had conversations with academic leaders who say how difficult it is to find people. If you're not cultivating a pool of people, it is difficult to expect that somehow, they will emerge out of nowhere. And so, it is not just about the hiring committee. It's all the work that needs to happen from our undergraduate to our graduate students, making sure that they're made to feel a sense of belonging. It's how we advertise, how we draw on existing networks. And if you're not already part of these networks, you don't even know these opportunities exist. How are we reading letters of reference, for example? All of these things are part of what needs to happen.

Even more important is what we do when people come here. Because a lot of times, we can let people through the door but if the environment that they are coming into is not conducive for the work that they need to do, we set people up for failure and blame them instead of our structures for their inability to deliver on what it is that we bring them in to do.

CA: To follow up on this important question of faculty hiring, we have witnessed countless instances of exclusionary practices around hiring (sometimes unintentional or as a result of hidden bias) that continue to create barriers to building diverse faculty representation in departments. How could this unlearning and relearning around these principles of the Charter occur?

WT: There has to be a full arc from long before the hiring committee is constituted to make sure that we are creating the right pathways to that opportunity. When there are hiring committees, what are the accountabilities that they have as hiring committees towards this commitment that we've made and how do we as a community ensure that people flourish? That is the ultimate goal of all of this—Black flourishing, right? It is not just saying let Black people through the door, it's that they thrive, flourish, and make their due contributions to our societies. And so, I would think that processes are an important part of that, accountability is certainly a huge part of that. And we need to make sure that our procedures are revised to be [open] to the kind of changes that we're talking about.

What is excellence? We're using the same measures of excellence, some of which have to do with people's appearances because they don't look like us, right? Somebody comes in and they've got dreadlocks, suddenly people [on the committee] have made a decision even before that person opens their mouth. And so how are we making sure that we're addressing those kinds of things? I would argue that this is work in progress. It's not just people at the top who have to hold themselves accountable. We need to have peers who are helping to ensure accountability. And that is why throughout the dialogue and this process we made sure that this was not just the work of Black people. We all have to be part of this effort collectively.

RB: Some universities have recently launched cohort hires [of Black faculty] in response to the Charter and internal anti-Black racism initiatives. What are your thoughts on the processes of these initiatives?

AB: As you know, I've spent the last two years chairing the Employment Equity Act Review Task Force and writing the report.[10] Our task force heard from hundreds of actors, including members of employment equity groups, on their experiences of these processes that do not take into account the depth of their potential workplace contributions and the particularly important role played by institutions of higher education. I have also been able to assess some of the innovative approaches that have been adopted, including through the tri-agency and the way in which their very clear incentive-based structures surrounding, in particular, the Canada Research Chair (CRC) program have started to help to shift the equity dynamic. If our sector can recruit some of the top talents around the world in some of the most specialized fields and do that in an inclusive manner to build a representative CRC program, then maybe some other workplaces should look more closely at what is happening and what can be learned. We need to make sure we are having the right discussions. We need to pay close attention to how to avoid reproducing patterns of exclusion.

In particular, if you're trying to make changes without being meaningfully consultative of the communities that are involved, you will reproduce patterns of exclusion. If you're doing cluster hires one year but not thinking more comprehensively about how to remove barriers from mainstream hiring processes, you're going to keep reproducing exclusions rather than building inclusive excellence. Do you need to do cluster hires? Of course. It is absolutely important to remedy underrepresentation.

But I worry that institutions are not thinking structurally about what notions like inclusive excellence and Black flourishing entail. They call for holistic processes. They require us to think across the board about the barriers that are embedded in the way that we go about our searches and then in the way that we receive people into our community. We can't just assume they will just fit in but not think about the ways our institutions need to change and the measures we need to take to support transformative change.

It is about being genuinely open to the kind of challenge that inclusion brings to the movement. And I'm going to also mention that we've been thinking about academics when we think about inclusive excellence because that's where the dichotomy tends to emerge most prominently. But with the pluralization of staff members, it arises there too. And we're seeing just the extent of the under-

representation as we move up the hierarchy of people who are on non-tenure track positions of various natures and we need to keep an eye on both where historically marginalized groups and members of Black communities in particular are finding themselves and why and whether we're reproducing a range of patterns of exclusion or of differential inclusion through them.

So, there's a much more comprehensive discussion that needs to take place and that the Scarborough Charter seeks to enable. A closing comment in relation to this is that the Scarborough Charter is part of enabling a process of change. We have to be very careful not to assume that it can encompass all of that change. Its added value is its ability to allow those who are seeking solutions to work together to incentivize important forward movement. It's an opportunity also for various constituencies within institutions of higher education, including Black caucuses, and also student groups and the like, to work with a spirit of mutuality and hold their institutions accountable.

Finally, I'll insist on this again, there's a broader regulatory framework and broader networks of actors who are important to ensuring that we understand the Scarborough Charter initiative to be one specific instantiation of the importance of substantive equality and societal transformation.

WT: It's important, when we have these conversations, to think about hiring committees as not just limited to faculty hiring but for staff hiring as well. The things that we have talked about here are applicable. We should also talk about recruitment and enrollment on the student side. Because I think the same things apply. What kinds of students do we recruit, what opportunities are we extending to particular categories of students? The consultative process that Adelle talked about, in terms of how we are able to determine excellence, is key. The work that the medical school here at the University of Toronto has done, which is now being replicated in other places, is about a process that, again, is not diminishing quality and excellence but recognizing other ways in which we are able to identify excellence and support the students.

So, I think the student piece is important. It is the same thing even with our community partnerships. The Charter doesn't just look inward, it looks outward as well. How do we determine who the partners are, who the difficult partners we deal with are? Because when something doesn't fit into our mould, somehow, it's difficult and then it becomes a deficit. I think of all these pieces when we talk about hiring. It's one element of how we bring people into our community and create a sense of belonging at the level of faculty, staff, students, community partners, and so on. I think that broad understanding of things is important.

And the last thing I wanted to say is in response to people who talk about the Charter being top down. It is helpful that the facts be known, which is why it's important to tell the story of how we got here. Everyone does their part and hands it off to other people who have a responsibility to deliver on aspects of this. For me, this is not a process you look into and then get off the ramp. No, this is a continuous process and so we need to hold ourselves and institutions accountable. People at the grassroots have engendered this process and their institutions have signed the Charter on their behalf. It's important that they continue to own the process and hold folks accountable. That is why the steering committee is not beholden to one particular institution; it is committed to the overall project that we all have before us. So, I would encourage people to say, "Well, you've signed onto this; therefore you are accountable and we have the license to call you out on what you're doing in support of this."

The biggest asset we've got is the people and their ability to hold institutions accountable because institutions have a tendency to veer off in different directions. And that compass resides with the people in these institutions. Those that have not signed up will do it only if they're feeling the pressure from inside their institution. That pressure should avoid falling victim to false narratives that suggest the work that needs to be done to promote Indigenization and reconciliation cannot be done simultaneously with other initiatives, such as the Scarborough Charter. Our way of looking at this is to say, in fact, anything you do to advance Indigeneity and Black inclusion is mutually reinforcing.

RB: How in your opinion can the Charter and its implementation become more of a grassroots movement across Canadian institutions involving as many students, staff, and faculty as possible?

WT: "Let's have everyone play their role to advance that common purpose," would be the way that I frame it. And let's not create these perceptions that somehow the grassroots are not involved. This, you know, would be a

disservice to them because this outcome is, in large measure, a product of the work, the sweat, the toil, that the grassroots have put into this effort. So hopefully, sharing the story of this journey helps to bridge that divide because I worry when it's framed in those binary terms. And the grassroots should not say, "Our work is done." Because this work is still very fragile. You just have to look south of the border and at some institutions to see that this work is truly fragile. We need to make sure that it's on steady ground, it is solid, and it becomes part of the daily routine in our institutions before we can take a breather. We don't have the luxury of time to be taking our feet off the pedal until the work is done.

AB: And I would just add on that very last point about the divide: there are so many actors along the spectrum, between the grassroots and, you pinpoint it in particular, senior executives in universities. I'm very conscious that I am currently the only non-senior administrator on the Inter-Institutional Steering Committee.[9] There has been a rather deliberate naming in the Scarborough Charter of a range of actors who have a role to play. In this conversation we've referenced the tri-agency and the parliamentary Black caucus. There's also the Canadian Association of University Teachers: what have they said and done about this initiative? What kind of outreach might be necessary there? There's a role for Caucuses of Black Faculty and Staff, as Wisdom mentioned. Many of the student organizations, who have played such a pivotal role for so long, are heralded in the text and are crucial to any continuity on Scarborough Charter principles, actions, and accountabilities. So, the small and representative group members on the Inter-Institutional Steering Committee are all engaged in this important work, in addition to everything else they are responsible for, and they do this work out of commitment and community self-love.

An initiative like this special journal issue, to ensure that there's a conversation about these questions, is absolutely precious for this work. So, thank you again for doing this and for taking the time. I think the ongoing education around the Scarborough Charter—its possibilities and its limits—is crucial and the institutional sense of what can be done with it needs to be thickened and deepened. We are not only moving beyond a binary but really paying close attention to everything along the way and how we use the various levers to move the shared vision forward.

I hope that's helpful. I hope that completes some of the insights. Thank you for your time. Thank you for your energy and your passion. It's been really inspiring.

Endnotes

1. Scarborough Charter on anti-Black Racism and Black Inclusion in Canadian Higher Education: Principles, Actions, and Accountabilities. 2021. National Dialogues and Action for Inclusive Higher Education and Communities. https://www.utsc.utoronto.ca/

2. For a list of committe members, see: https://www.utsc.utoronto.ca/nationaldialogues/partner-institutions-organizations-and-contributors

3. The National Dialogues and Action for Inclusive Higher Education and Communities are a series of national forums focused on addressing equity and inclusion in Canadian post-secondary education. The first in the series was a National Dialogue that focused on anti-Black racism and Black inclusion in Canadian higher education. The virtual dialogues took place on Thursday, October 1 and Friday, October 2, 12 pm – 4 pm (ET), 2020. https://www.utsc.utoronto.ca/nationaldialogues/

4. CIHR supports the discoveries and innovations that improve our health and strengthen our health-care system. NSERC funds visionaries, explorers and innovators who are searching for the scientific and technological breakthroughs that will benefit our country. SSHRC invests in research and talent that builds deeper knowledge of human cultures and behaviour to strengthen socio-economic prosperity and well-being in society. https://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/about-au_sujet/collaboration/tri-agency_funding_programs-programmes_financement_trois_organismes-eng.aspx

5. U15 Canada is an association of fifteen leading research universities across Canada. Members of U15 Canada are those Canadian research-intensive universities that came together in 2012 to form an association dedicated to helping advance research and innovation policies and programs for the benefit of all Canadians. https://u15.ca/about-us/

6.The CIC is the national and international voice of Canada's largest post-secondary education network. This group supports Canada's publicly supported colleges, institutes, CEGEPs, and polytechnics. https://www.collegesinstitutes.ca/

7. https://www.queensu.ca/alumnireview/articles/2023-05-11/principal-message-active-partners

8. The Scarborough Charter Inter-Institutional Forum is comprised of signatory institutions of the Scarborough Charter on Anti-Black Racism and Black Inclusion in Higher Education: Principles, Actions, and Accountabilities. The Forum is committed to working collaboratively to deliver on the principles, actions and accountabilities outlined in the Scarborough Charter, to redress anti-Black racism and promote Black inclusion in the Canadian higher education sector. https://www.utsc.utoronto.ca/scarborough-charter/activities-inter-institutional-forum.

9. https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/esdc-edsc/documents/corporate/portfolio/labour/programs/employment-equity/reports/act-review-task-force/EEA-Review-Task-Force-Report-2023-v2.pdf

10. The Inter-institutional steering committee on Inclusive Higher Education will hold signatories accountable to the commitments toward best efforts as outlined in the Charter. https://www.utsc.utoronto.ca/scarborough-charter/sites/utsc.utoronto.ca.scarborough-charter/files/docs/Scarborough_Charter_EN_Nov2022.pdf

Works Cited

James, C.L.R. [1963] 2013. *Beyond a Boundary.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.