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Delving into Institutional Diversity Messaging

A Cross-Institutional Analysis of Student and Faculty Interpretations of Undergraduate Experiences of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in University Websites

ABSTRACT

Recognizing that university statements about equity, diversity, and inclusion are often cosmetic, performative, or at best, aspirational, rather than indicative of on-campus realities, this project analyzes interpretations of student identity and diversity through publicly available materials. The primary purpose of this research was to investigate how university messages about equity, diversity, and inclusion, available through public websites, are interpreted by faculty and students. Using a students-as-partners approach, we identified and analyzed themes based on our own perceptions and understandings of each of five university websites University of Calgary (Canada), University of Alabama (USA), Deakin University (Australia), University of Exeter (UK), and Portland State University (USA). While equity, diversity, and inclusion are signature initiatives at many universities, we found that analyses of their websites suggest that the ways in which those are operationalized differ. The patterns identified suggest that messaging through university websites can promote or detract from equity, diversity, and inclusion in university settings, and we observed differences in the ways in which institutions operationalized and represented initiatives related to equity, diversity, and inclusion. Exploring how these efforts at our five institutions are messaged to and interpreted by students provides a better understanding of the institutional priorities and the assumed values identified by student co-researchers. The use of student co-researchers proved an especially valuable contribution to this analysis to gain perspectives about presentations of student identity and diversity. Using this form of embedded research, we identify the limited presentations of and perceptions around diversity at institutions of higher education cited by student co-researchers.

KEYWORDS

equity, diversity, inclusion, institutional websites, students-as-partners

INTRODUCTION

Institutions of higher education have long emphasized a tripartite mission of teaching, research, and service. Many have more recently added a commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) as an institutional priority; however, these diversity statements are sometimes criticized as more performative than substantive (Hoffman and Mitchell 2016). Contemporary students are increasingly diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and competing priorities (i.e. caregiving and work responsibilities, financial difficulties, geographical constraints, and disabilities) (Jorre de St Jorre, Oliver, and Chamberlain 2018; Stone 2017). Public-facing university messaging holds the power to strengthen universities by bringing different perspectives, voices, and approaches, but frequently fails to make apparent the "vibrant energy and diversity" of the student body (Facts and Figures 2019) that is often claimed. The front-facing messaging does little to uphold the equity, diversity, and inclusion commitments proclaimed by official documentation.

Despite government policies intended to improve access to higher education, opportunities remain inequitable across global contexts (James et. al 2008). Furthermore, there is a growing concern that university systems actually reinforce the expectations of dominant structures, which can result in a magnification of privilege and disadvantage (Harvey et al. 2017). This project looks to these concerns in our own university contexts. As part of a larger program of research interested in student identity and diversity in capstone experiences, this project includes five institutions from different national contexts: University of Calgary (Canada), University of Alabama (USA), Deakin University (Australia), University of Exeter (UK), and Portland State University (USA). The primary purpose of this research was to better understand the messages our five higher education institutions are sending through publicly available websites related to EDI and how those messages are interpreted by faculty and students. The research team employed a students-as-partners approach (Cook-Sather, Bahti, and Ntem 2019) to enable richer analysis and comparison of perspectives between students and staff. Doing so allowed for the research team to identify patterns that both promote and detract from equity, diversity, and inclusion in our university settings. While equity, diversity, and inclusion may be signature initiatives at many universities, these efforts are operationalized differently. To explore how these efforts are put into practice, student co-researchers provided their reflections (e.g., first impressions, prominent messaging) on a series of institutional websites (e.g., university home page, resources for students). Exploring how these efforts at each of our five institutions are messaged to and interpreted by students provides a better understanding of the institutional priorities and the assumed values identified by student co-researchers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Official institutional websites have become a common medium through which institutions signal their values to external stakeholders (Morphew and Hartley 2006). Thus, as colleges and universities embrace missions that advance EDI, many institutions use their websites to communicate those values (Williams and Clowney 2007; Wilson, Meyer, and McNeal 2012). Higher education institutions design their websites to appeal to and communicate with a broad range of stakeholders, but potential students tend to be the primary audience, with a strong emphasis on the individual benefits for students (Saichaie and Morphew 2014) often through visual representations of a racially and ethnically

diverse student body (Pippert, Essenburg, and Matchett 2013). However, those visual representations tend to over represent the reality of diversity on campus or how campus policies truly reflect the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion (Pippert, Essenburg, and Matchett 2013; Wilson and Meyer 2009). This is consistent with research that suggests that institutional talk about diversity, equity, and inclusion can be "performative," despite pressure to move beyond "cosmetic diversity" and focus on statements that are tied to and backed up by concrete action (Hoffman and Mitchell 2016).

Even for institutions that have been recognized as exemplars for their commitment to diversity and inclusion, LePeau, Hurtado, and Davis (2018), found that their websites "predominantly articulated goals for increasing compositional diversity" (139). Building on LePeau's (2015) framework that examines partnerships between student affairs and academic affairs in pursuit of diversity and inclusion, LePeau, Hurtado, and Davis (2018) stress the necessity of pervasive institutional change in order to "disrupt inequities rather than reproduce them" (139). Likewise, Harris, Barone, and Patton-Davis (2015) emphasize the need to resist "jargon-laden diversity statements, policies, and commitments, which are not explicitly critical of systems of institutionalized privilege" (33), which can stall, and often reverse, progress toward equity.

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) represents a key pathway for advancing EDI in a way that moves past the cosmetic and jargon-laden critiques discussed above and advances excellence for all students (Felten et al. 2013). Accordingly, our research is fundamentally grounded in SoTL, which has become increasingly connected to questions of diversity and social justice (Behari-Leak 2020; Rankin and Sawani 2019; Wade, Bean, and Teixeira-Poit 2019), as well as the realities of inclusivity within the "Big Tent" where all are welcome in higher education (Hutchings 2013; Miller-Young, Yeo, and Manarin 2018). This transformational movement in the academy (Gilpin and Liston 2009) opens the door to questions about the equity, diversity, and inclusivity of teaching and learning environments, and the imperative to take up social transformation in SoTL as a "concept of moral action aimed at cultural change" (Shulman 2002, viii).

In line with this transformational movement, the practice of engaging with students-as-partners (SaPs) is gaining momentum internationally (Mercer-Mapstone et al. 2017) and is increasingly researched in SoTL work (see for example the International Institute on Students as Partners Institute and the *International Journal for Students as Partners*). In these partnerships, students and faculty collaborate and contribute to pedagogical and research projects in equal, but different ways (Cook-Sather et al. 2019) to facilitate more equitable, diverse, and inclusive educational opportunities. Engaging in these partnerships, faculty members can gain "perspective they cannot achieve on their own" (3), students are able to meaningfully contribute to scholarship through their unique perspectives, and together, students and faculty can build a sense of shared power and responsibility (Cook-Sather et al. 2019).

This research brings together the recognition of the institutional prioritization of EDI, and the recognized benefits of using a SaP approach. Leveraging the emerging recognition and strength of diversity and diverse perspectives in SoTL work has allowed this student-faculty team to further identify some of the presentations of and perceptions around diversity cited by students and the resulting imperative to explore these parallel perceptions.

METHODS

This multi-site case study (Merriam 2009; Stake 2013; Yin 2017) stems from a collaboration among faculty from five higher education institutions in four countries and seven students from one of those institutions. Analysis of data from the public website of each of the authors' institutions has allowed for comparison of EDI messaging across institutions and international contexts. Collaboration with student co-researchers enabled richer analysis and deepened our understanding of institutional rhetoric.

Data collection focused on how our institutions are communicating messages about diversity and inclusion. To accomplish this, we collected data from publicly available websites that speak to a variety of internal and external stakeholders, but do not necessarily have a specific focus on diversity and inclusion. Our goal was to better understand the degree to which the values of diversity and inclusion are pervasive throughout the greater web presence of each institution. While each university website presented different content, student co-researchers were asked to identify themes across the five sites considering the prominence of EDI messages included by each. Iterative analysis by student and staff co-researchers enabled comparison of subjective interpretations of the messaging communicated through university websites and was important to identifying common themes and interpreting how those patterns might promote or detract from the EDI messaging of the institutions sampled.

Research team

This project uses expertise from an international, multidisciplinary research team. The five researchers, whose faculty and professional roles all include an intentional focus on teaching and learning, each work directly with students through classroom instruction, individual or organizational advising, and/or programmatic development. The student experience is at the heart of our work and one of our collective core assumptions is a deliberate equity approach we take to our roles.

The implementation of an EDI influenced students-as-partners approach in this research allowed us to create more inclusion and diversity within our own research team. The assurance that student mentorship is equitable, diverse, and inclusive is central to its impact. Critical elements of mentorship include reciprocity, learning relationships, partnership, collaboration, mutually defined goals, and development (Zachary 2011). Contemporary models of mentorship illustrate the shifting of traditional mentorship relations to include undergraduate students and highlight changing boundaries between students and faculty (Barrette-Ng et al. 2019). The use of a students-as-partners approach allows us to further blur the boundaries between faculty and students who bring a variety of identities, expertise, experience, and context to the materials that they engage with.

Student co-researchers were an essential part of the research team. Among the many benefits that can be achieved through pedagogical partnerships, this particular research was driven by the potential to "affirm and empower all those involved and to support their development into versions of the selves they want to be" (Cook-Sather, Bahti, and Ntem 2019, 2). While the professional researchers had a certain degree of disciplinary expertise and experience working in the field, the student co-researchers were much more attuned to the student learning experience than the professional researchers could hope to be. To be clear, students were not simply subjects of the research or data points; their participation as co-researchers occurred at every level of the research process, including the identification of the questions being asked, the data collection and analysis, and the reporting and

interpretation of the findings. Student co-researchers were all students at the University of Calgary, who completed this research as part of a capstone course. Students were only available in this capacity at that institution, which is why they are limited to one location. Student co-researchers requested this placement and were included in the research based on this request. The students who worked on the project, all female, are representative of the female dominated program they are a part of, and range in age, work and family commitments, and racial/ethnic heritage. Two cohorts of student co-researchers contributed to the project at different times and their specific roles are described in detail below. Cohort A consisted of one senior level (260 hours) and four junior level (130 hours) capstone students, Cohort B included one senior level (260 hours) and one junior level (130 hours) capstone students. This research received ethics approval from the University of Calgary and Deakin University. An ethics review board authorization for collaborative research was obtained from the home institution of each of the remaining members of the research team.

Research sites

Publicly available data was collected from five universities in four countries (see table 1). As all those institutions are relatively large, public research institutions, we readily acknowledge that our cases are not representative of the global higher education landscape, and we do not intend for the findings from our research to be considered generalizable. Instead, our focus is on highly contextualized observations and the resulting emergent themes.

Table 1. Research sites

University	Country	Type
Deakin University	Australia	Large, public, research
Portland State University	USA	Large, public, urban, research
University of Alabama	USA	Large, public, research
University of Calgary	Canada	Large, public, research
University of Exeter	UK	Large, public, research

There are a variety of factors that influence the perceptions of students and faculty members related to creating positive and effective learning environments. Influenced by an embedded research approach (McGinity and Salokangas 2014), we intentionally sought to increase collaboration among researchers and work toward more practical and actionable findings for the stakeholders of those organizations (Cheetham et al. 2018). Our research was also informed by the principles of community-engaged scholarship that include building and sustaining mutually beneficial partnerships by connecting institutional knowledge and resources to critical public issues (Boyer 1996; Holland 2005; Welch 2016). In other words, this work goes beyond simply doing work at a research site; instead, it leverages the expertise and knowledge of the organizations within which the researchers are embedded in pursuit of partnership and co-creation. Although challenging because of the inherent added complexity resulting in working outside of traditional academic norms, embedded research has the potential to increase the impact of scholarly work (Vindrola-Padros et al. 2017).

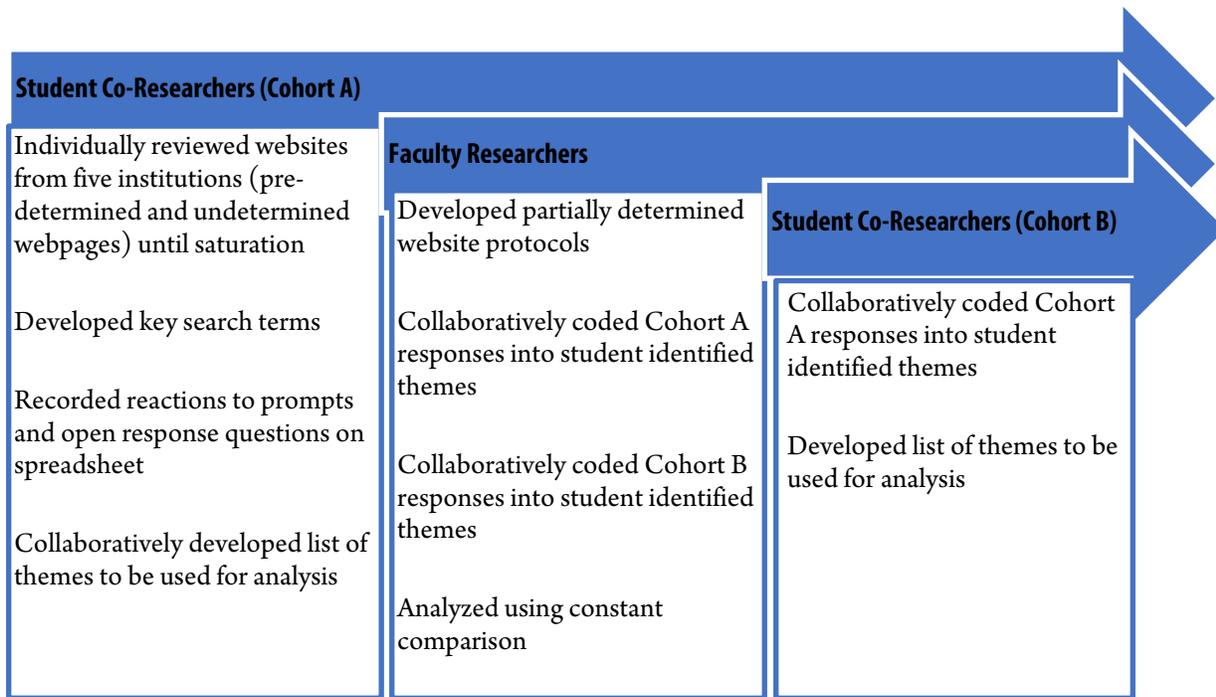**Data collection and analysis**

Each of the professional researchers/faculty from each institution contributed to preliminary investigation of their own institution's website in order to identify, compare, and interpret pages and search terms relevant to examining messaging about EDI within their national and institutional context. That investigation informed partial development of the website data collection protocol, including identification of sample pages and the development of prompts to guide student analysis of webpages. Student co-researchers were then asked to look at 20 webpages for each university and to answer 12 questions about each webpage. The list of webpages to visit was partially determined by faculty prior to analysis, and included the institution's home page, mission and/or vision statement, "About Us" page, student affairs information, diversity offices, and teaching and learning websites (see table 2 and figure 1). Other websites were identified by student co-researchers as they refined the protocol and identified key search terms relevant to analysis.

Table 2. Website review protocol

Web pages	Questions asked about each page
University home page; Screenshot of home page and image(s) at time of collection	● URL
Generic capstone page (if exists);	● First impression: Describe what you see and feel at first glance
Center for Teaching and Learning (or similar) page? Paired with other "high impact" practices?	● Photos: Who is in the photos? How, if at all, does it represent diversity, the "good student"?
Our individual program page (where applicable)?	
Current student page	
Future student page	● What descriptors are used to describe capstones?
About Us/Life at… type pages	
Equity/Diversity Office page (if exists)	
Aboriginal student/multicultural student affairs	● What descriptors are used to describe diversity
Student organizations, groups, clubs, etc.	
Disability Office	● Are diversity and capstone discussed together?
Additional areas that come up when using search terms in university search feature (i.e. courses, offices, projects, events, admissions, access/disability office)	● What headings are used?
Strategic agenda/plan document	● What is the prominent message of the page?
Policy library (for university and/or faculty) search under policies and procedures?	
Student handbook - program entry	● Is there a video? What does it contain?
Unit/subject guide	

Institutional "newsroom," social media stories, etc.	• Point of view: Who is the page intended for?
Accreditation self-study documents	
University charter/governance documents	
Teaching Excellence Framework reports	• What, if any, specific groups are identified on the page?
	• Does this reflect a deficit- or asset-based perspective?

Figure 1. Analytical process used to develop and code and analyze themes

Student Co-Researchers (Cohort A)

Individually reviewed websites from five institutions (pre-determined and undetermined webpages) until saturation

Developed key search terms

Recorded reactions to prompts and open response questions on spreadsheet

Collaboratively developed list of themes to be used for analysis

Faculty Researchers

Developed partially determined website protocols

Collaboratively coded Cohort A responses into student identified themes

Collaboratively coded Cohort B responses into student identified themes

Analyzed using constant comparison

Student Co-Researchers (Cohort B)

Collaboratively coded Cohort A responses into student identified themes

Developed list of themes to be used for analysis

On each website, the first cohort of student co-researchers recorded their reactions in a spreadsheet, responding to a series of prompts as well as recording open responses. They responded to the language used on each of the websites, as well as the imagery that was included. They also recorded their perceptions on whether any of the pages were particularly difficult to find. Based on their reactions to the content of the institutions' websites, the first cohort of student co-researchers collaboratively developed a list of themes that emerged to be used for subsequent analyses.

Building from the themes identified by the first cohort of students, our research was next guided by the grounded theory approach, and data were analyzed using the constant comparison method (Corbin and Strauss 2008; Glaser and Strauss 2017; Merriam 2009) in order to build toward a

substantive theory, or one that "applies to a specific aspect of practice" (Merriam 2009, 200). In our case, this meant building toward a better understanding of the transmission and interpretation of each institution's specific messaging.

Next, two faculty researchers (Rankin and Pearl) coded the responses from the first cohort of student co-researchers, using the themes identified by those students as *a priori* codes (table 3), and following the approach recommended by Corbin and Strauss (2008). Coding was conducted collaboratively, with each response discussed prior to assigning code. Many of the students' recorded responses received multiple codes.

Table 3. Student-identified themes

Diversity	Research	Different skills
Student experience	Community	Conversations
Strategy	Involvement	Collaboration
Support services	Student satisfaction	Work-life balance
Belonging	Disability	Conventional boundaries
Connecting and socializing	Other	Inclusive community
Teaching excellence	Impact	Enabling
Target audience	Innovation	Teaching quality
Deficit/asset	Globally connected	Culture
Learning environment	Positive difference	Transparency
Employment/future careers	Accessibility	

As an additional step to reinforce the validity of the analysis and subsequent findings, a second cohort of student co-researchers analyzed the responses from the first cohort using the same themes as *a priori* codes. The interpretation and coding of the responses from the first cohort of student co-researchers differed between the faculty researchers and the second cohort of student co-researchers. For example, Cohort A focused significantly on student experience and the way that the different websites represented this. They ascribed "belonging" and diversity to environments that seemed "fun and busy" and "colourful." Cohort B added themes of transparency and global connections to what they interpreted as diversity. Faculty researchers tended to identify diversity descriptors as markers of belonging, describing who is captured or missing from photos based on categories such as age, ability, gender, and race. Both students and faculty noted the differences in national contexts and the differing ways in which information was presented, for example the formality or informality of the content, the types of pictures used, and use of colloquial language unfamiliar outside of specific contexts. These differences reinforced the notion that relying solely on the academic insight and expertise of the faculty researchers would have rendered the analysis incomplete.

FINDINGS

The student co-researchers in Cohort A initially developed 32 themes to code their interpretations of website data, with the following eight themes appearing most frequently: diversity, student experience, strategy, support services, belonging, connecting and socializing, teaching excellence, deficit- or asset-based, target audience, and learning environment. For this study, deficit- or

asset-based and target audience data were removed based on their lack of relevance to the research questions. All quotes in this section come from the observations of student co-researchers in Cohort A.

1. **Diversity**: Student co-researchers were advised of the research topic for this project and were therefore cued to look for diversity in the websites that they reviewed. In their observations, students noted an intentional focus on and inclusion of visible diversity. The data shows a primary focus on visible differences, most significantly in terms of race and gender. Several student co-researchers identified examples such as students from multiple ethnic backgrounds working together, modeling what they identified as "good student behavior." They noted diversity being described as an asset, as well as institutional commitments to EDI principles. However, while institutions emphasized the availability of student supports, resources to support students with disability, "access," "availability of accommodations," and "flexible learning" as examples of diversity on campus, these supports generally were not represented by visual images. Universities in Canada and Australia were identified to have noticeable support for Indigenous students. A lack of diversity was noted in some policy and procedure documents, in contrast to the more readily accessible public-facing websites.

2. **Student experience**: Website data highlighted a focus on student life, everyday experiences, and what it looks like to be a student at the university. Student co-researchers identified the purposeful inclusion of diverse groups of students and diverse faculty and students working together. These data also highlight how websites about the social experience of being a student are "easy to find" and "very present." The prevalence of information on clubs, student organizations, and "opportunity for all students to find their place" is noted. Some institutions show images of student research, study abroad, community-based learning, and capstone opportunities. These "visually appealing" and "attention getting" sites are positively regarded by student co-researchers as they relate to inclusion and diversity.

3. **Strategy**: Overall goals, strategies, and mission are cited as accessible and "easy" to find in spite of the different names and languages used for documents and initiatives. Strategic plans, reporting, and accreditation were also easily located. A significant number of plans, goals, and strategies, often "very lofty," focus on growth. These documents are more easily found within specific departments, rather than for universities as a whole. Student co-researchers prefer sites with visual elements rather than the "text heavy" documents they often found in this category.

4. **Support services**: Student support services focus on employability, job prospects, and ways that universities can prepare students for future careers. Supports for current and future students around diversity, student life, social experiences, and creating space to support students is recognized as an additional focus. Support resources for specific groups of students are recognized in the areas of disability and academic supports, the need to support diverse students across universities, and support for Indigenous students in Canada and Australia. The high levels of support provided in one university is noted as a "selling point." These webpages are easily found and accessible across universities.

5. **Belonging**: Photos are identified as a way that the universities demonstrate inclusion, "no matter who you are." Images show students from diverse backgrounds making a positive difference, and tie closely to support services. Variation between students including "age" and "diverse backgrounds" is noted as important. Social media platforms further uphold this message

through showing belonging and participation in social experiences. Student connections to campus traditions, and the cities in which universities are located, also demonstrate belonging, as does the use of "justice-oriented language" and "anti-harassment policies."

6. **Connecting and socializing**: Extracurricular activities, including student organizations, groups, and activities, are the most commonly cited areas included in this theme. Students discuss various arts and cultural events, links to clubs, sports teams, and shared interests. There is a breadth of social opportunities available alongside positive encouragement to join organizations, increase social activity, and create friendships. Personal stories, recruitment materials, and links to get involved are discussed as ways to increase university experiences, to "find common ground" and promote opportunity which is "accessible." Photos described under this theme capture students walking around campuses and buildings, diverse students engaging together, and sporting events. Photos are described as "colorful" and making "campus look fun."

7. **Teaching excellence**: Student co-researchers identify areas such as the availability of a "Teaching Excellence Framework," and the structuring of education as factors in students' success. In addition, the availability of teaching guidelines, an emphasis on teaching quality, the quality of learning environments, and an increased awareness of the central role of teaching in student well-being are noted. Teaching awards also feature prominently on university websites. Aspirations to be the "best in education," to have "outstanding faculty" and to recognize "unique teaching methods" with awards are pervasive. Teaching award winners are featured alongside student achievements. These awards and their descriptions appear frequently alongside images of students and faculty working together, student collaboration, and images of high-impact practices.

8. **Learning environment**: Data about the presentation of university learning environments emphasizes images of "good students." This includes descriptors of a "woman working in the library," a "male student looking at a sample through a microscope," "students studying in the library," and "books (with no images of people)." Students identified phrases such as "reward your passion," "discover our inspiring campus," and "we're here to help" as contributing to successful learning environments.

DISCUSSION

As expected, given the purpose of this research and the prompts they were given, the student co-researchers identified the theme of diversity as pervasive throughout the data. The similarities and differences between student and faculty perceptions is an area to be explored in further research. It is notable to consider what students coded and identified as representative of diversity. Their primary focus centered on visual markers of difference, which is unsurprising given the primary units of analysis were institutional websites. They were, however, asked to look at the images and texts on each page, as well as some pages providing only text. In particular, the student co-researchers noted diversity in race and ethnicity, sex and gender, and in some cases, visual religious differences (e.g., student wearing a hijab). Several areas of diversity were noticeably absent in the student analyses of visual representations across sites, such as age, disability, and representation of Aboriginal students (with the exception of one site). While two universities (Deakin University and University of Calgary) specifically addressed

Aboriginal students, one was noted to have no visual representation of Aboriginal students (University of Calgary).

The student co-researchers also identified many examples that demonstrated a sense of belonging, connectedness, and inclusive participation as central messages being sent about higher education. Students noted these themes through visual representations of students from diverse backgrounds taking part in and being a part of university traditions, such as athletic or campus-wide events. The student co-researchers saw this as a signal that any student is welcome and can feel at home with these traditions. The student co-researchers interpreted the existence of a wide range of student clubs and organizations as additional evidence of this messaging that diversity, equity, and inclusion are important to student life on campus.

The student co-researchers identified that each of the universities analyzed has some type of easily found statement or website that suggests an institutional commitment to diversity. This is consistent with previous research that suggests that institutions provide these normative statements in an effort to signal institutional values to external stakeholders and potential students (Hoffman and Mitchell 2016; Pippert, Essenburg, and Matchett 2013; Wilson, Meyer, and McNeal 2012). If these statements and visual representations send signals that are not matched by the reality of institutional actions, students who come from marginalized backgrounds are doubly disadvantaged by institutions that exclude them but do so under the guise of inclusion. Showing images of diversity amongst students is a performative nod to diversity, often without any underlying commitment supporting the diverse needs of university community members. The question that remains, and should be the focus of future research, is how are the messages about diversity, equity, and inclusion in student life supported through policy and practice on campus and through the curriculum? As this line of research continues, we hope to identify barriers and systemic exclusions of students who have traditionally been marginalized in higher education. We plan to identify pathways for creating experiences and learning opportunities that are welcoming to and appropriate for all students, regardless of their individual, intersecting identities. By better understanding how traditionally underrepresented students have been made invisible, and how their needs and accommodations have not been met, we believe that we can begin to disrupt many of the power assumptions embedded in higher education, rather than setting the expectation that traditionally marginalized students assimilate. All students face barriers to entry and success in higher education, but it is essential to recognize the additional barriers experienced from marginalized students in order to understand the broader range of equity, diversity, and inclusion that could exist within higher education.

Recommendations and implications
One avenue that might be employed to answer this question is for instructors to push back against the normative structures in higher education in order to embody the values that we purport to espouse. However, while instructors clearly play a crucial role in supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion, this burden cannot be their responsibility alone. It is not enough for universities to provide normative statements of support for diversity, equity, and inclusion without building in appropriate institutional supports for the implementation of those values. Instead, it is incumbent on institutions to instill those values holistically. This includes providing the space and resources for instructors to professionally develop their skills and abilities and the assurance that this work will not be penalized, but

rather rewarded through annual evaluations and the promotion and tenure process. Building a supportive institutional infrastructure provides a solid foundation from which we can take up the call to "remain critically aware of not only issues of power that exist within partnerships, but also those that may prevent partnerships from forming in the first place" (Acai et al. 2017, 6). Doing so leads to a pathway through which students and instructors can work together to subvert existing inequitable power structures that underlie the curriculum and privilege (Quaye et al. 2019).

Limitations

We acknowledge that by the nature of our study, our sample is limited, and our findings are not intended to be generalizable. While our institutions all purport to be supportive of diversity, equity, and inclusion through their missions and other information communicated publicly through their respective web presences, the degree of support throughout the global higher education landscape varies widely, despite normative expectations.

Another limitation of this study is the fact that all the student co-researchers involved in this particular part of the research project are from the University of Calgary. Therefore, especially for the first cohort of undergraduate co-researchers, their initial reads and reactions to each institution's website may have been influenced by the fact that they were already more familiar with the University of Calgary's website and may have been more apt to ascribe good intentions or assume the best about their own university because of their familiarity with the campus beyond information on the website.

CONCLUSION

As institutions of higher education continue to emphasize the values of equity, diversity, and inclusion as institutional priorities, strong statements that affirm these values are becoming increasingly common as normative expectations. These statements are often supported by visual representations on university websites that attempt to clearly communicate that all students, regardless of who they are or from where they come, are welcome and valued. As well-intentioned as these efforts are, they do not encompass the complete student experience and may be lacking in demonstrating how institutions are enacting substantive change (Harris, Barone, and Patton-Davis 2015; LePeau, Hurtado, and Davis 2018). In order for institutions to be fully participatory, they need to be purposeful in how they examine the "cultural dynamics that reproduce patterns of under-participation and exclusion" (Sturm 2006, 256) which "requires a genuine commitment of time and effort, an exploration of the student experience, institutional assessment and data analysis, and the ability and courage to implement change" (Finley and McNair 2013, 34). We believe that the present study, guided by a students-as-partners approach, offers a step toward critically examining not only what messages are being sent to students about equity, diversity, and inclusion, but how those messages are being received.

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ETHICS

This research received ethical approval from all participating institutions.

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