

# University of British Columbia School of Social Work Equity Dialogue Groups Report

---

Jody Max

February 2013

## Introduction

Since its formation in 2011, the UBC School of Social Work's Equity Task Force has been conducting research into diversity and inclusion, towards the development of an equity action plan. As part of that research, a series of dialogue groups were held with minoritized students at all levels of the program. This report summarizes the results, categorized by each group, and includes several participant recommendations for equity policies and practises.

## The Dialogue Groups

During the winter and spring of 2012, 5 different dialogue group processes were held in which 22 students participated. Each of the groups was facilitated by a member of faculty. Several individual discussions were also held and that information has been included within the summaries.

## **Race, Visible Minority and ESL**

There were 2 discussion groups for those who are visible minorities. One was comprised of 4 MSW students and the other had 2 BSW students. Although these were 2 separate dialogue groups, because there was so much overlap in the themes, they have been summarized together.

- Climate does not feel welcoming
- One participant noted: "When considering the school, looked at teachers and resumes. The lack of "my face" in the faculty, struck me. Don't get a sense of safety, you wonder how much you can relate to their experience; what they're going to be teaching you; the information they provide."
- The feeling is that the experience of people of colour, immigrant or international students is not valued in SOWK at UBC
- One participant described the feeling of "are these people actually interested in what I'm going to say? ...and then I shut up."
- Impatience is communicated non-verbally

- White entitlement engrained in many ways: some differences are ok to be named and analyzed while whiteness is not.
- No acknowledgment of personal resistance / discomfort to issues of equity and diversity
- Incidents of racist stereotypes and 'jokes' by professors.
- Visible minority students are often singled out by professors, and asked 'correct me if I am wrong' as they are assumed to be the expert on their own cultural group
- Homogenizing of visible minorities and differences not discussed, for example between newcomers and people of colour who have been here for generations
- Lack of acknowledgement and discussion about Canadian history of people of colour
- Lack of depth and nuance about race and culture in class discussions. Case studies commonly fall into stereotypes.
- Several students commented on wanting to learn how to recognise, address and unlearn racism and not getting that in current courses
- Race and different intersectionalities not discussed in class, gender, for example coming from privileged class background
- Ethnocentric/white centric norms taught ie. Direct questions in interviewing skills seen as standard
- General lack of facilitator experience among faculty in which assumptions or a lack of sensitivity in group sharing that results in quiet/inability to share
- No context of safety as it is solely a "Canadian" place
- Open discomfort when a member of a minority group raises an issue
- Immigration, Race, and Social Justice are not courses-they are the basis of the program but the curriculum does not cover this
- For international students, most of the focus is on language, writing and editing work rather than on academic content or engaging in intellectual exchanges. Negative impact on self-confidence and a major loss of opportunity to learn.
- Lack of coherent language assessment; subjective decision making on who gets accepted

- Lack of clarity on how self-disclosure of racialized identity is considered for admission

## Disability

There were several individual dialogues between an instructor and 3 students who live with disabilities.

- Inconsistent accommodation and support where some faculty supportive and others not.
- Accommodations through Access & Diversity inadequate; need to allow for extensions on assignments as well as extensions on exams; time extensions for exams are arbitrary; absence of an instructor during exams may disadvantage students with disabilities; process for requesting exam accommodations is extremely cumbersome.
- Lack of understanding and sensitivity about invisible disabilities, among students and faculty; offensive comments overheard by students; fear of stigmatization and discrimination
- Student has been transparent about disability, but this has led to unexpected negative consequences: (1) invasive questioning from other students; (2) feeling of being observed and pathologized; and (3) feeling that the student's input is not valued. School encourages norm of sharing, but sharing carries risk.
- Lack of visibility of people with disabilities and lack of support or mentoring opportunities for students; students feel isolated
- Student feels left out of some opportunities because of poverty associated with disability. One example cited is that the Aboriginal practicum is completely out of reach for low-income students.
- Insufficient disability curriculum content
- Faculty need to develop skills in addressing ableism in class

## LGBT

There were several sessions with LGBT students and participants included 3 BSW students, 3 MSW students, and 1 faculty member.

- Hetero-normativity is woven into the climate and is not addressed
- Need to be acknowledged that we are here and that being queer/LGBT is relevant to social work education and practice
- Complexity of issues around sexuality, orientation, identity and how 'out' someone is; wide range of experience, language, naming, self-presentation and sense of connection or not to LGBTQ identities and concepts
- Coming out is an ongoing experience and need support for navigating this both at school and in professional contexts
- Need for support for LGBTQ students and staff/faculty
- Insufficient curriculum content; appears to be a 'hierarchy of oppressions' – there are courses dedicated specifically to gender, First Nations, ethnicity and race, disability, but just one 4 session module in one 3<sup>rd</sup> year BSW course
- In the LGBT module, gay student overheard other students complaining about hearing too much about gay issues
- Faculty need to develop skills in addressing hetero-normativity, heterosexism and homophobia in class
- Request for development of a course on sexuality, orientation, gender identity and related oppressions

- Need to welcome and acknowledge queer people within the School at orientation and include someone from Pride UBC and other relevant campus organizations, so that all students aware of supports and services
- Include equity points for LGBTs on admission application
- Suggest development of Gay/Straight Alliance

## PhD

There was a PhD students group that included 3 participants, and written feedback came from 3 more students for a total of 6 altogether. Most of the participants were international students. Some of the comments below are more developed as they were previously prepared by a PhD Student representative.

- Poverty and lack of funding poses a serious barrier to students of marginalized and lower income backgrounds, as well as to international students. This lack of financial support has sometimes led to students dropping out, or putting their research on hold while they do paid work.
- Sexist discrimination is entrenched as evidenced by majority of female students observing preferential treatment given to the male students, such as disproportionate air time in class, related to as colleagues, whereas women related to as students, and higher marks.
- For ESL students, again a disproportionate focus on writing and language instead of intellectual content. One student commented: "I lost two years discussing grammar instead of being guided academically toward my research".
- Female ESL students expressed receiving far more negative critique regarding rewriting (e.g., comments from faculty questioning how they got so far in academia with such poor writing, insinuations of plagiarism when writing improved) than male ESL students who were simply asked to rewrite with emphasis on where content was unclear and where grammar could be improved.

- Lack of support for navigating stresses and challenges to immigrating, and for how to integrate into school. International students report that their reality is rarely a part of any discussion in the school and they feel alone in figuring it all out. Sense of isolation.
- All students expressed perceptions of inequality in various different classes where faculty made statements that were either blatantly offensive (e.g., "Don't get your brown skin upset!") or were more subtle in adversarial opinions where students have expressed feeling "silenced", "stupid", and "afraid to speak" .
- Students expressed reluctance to honestly evaluate courses since anonymity not assured and they did not trust faculty would not respond punitively. Some students stated they 'lied' on the evaluation to avoid repercussions from faculty with adversarial traits.
- Lack of information or process for how to address concerns, as well as lack of trust in faculty to receive criticism, has led to silencing and fear of backlash among students and has prevented complaints from being addressed.
- Lack of support and accommodation for parents with child care issues.

## Conclusion

As is evident in the wide range of comments summarized above, the school of social work has much work to do towards the creation of a welcoming, inclusive, supportive, respectful and truly diverse environment. The overarching theme that has recurred throughout the research, across the survey, and faculty interviews, is the ongoing othering and marginalization of minoritized people in this largely privileged, white-centric climate. While an extensive list of recommendations can be found in the case studies report, the other recurring theme that has woven itself through all the Equity Task Force

research speaks to the need for anti-colonialist, anti-racist, and anti-oppressive perspectives and approaches to be incorporated more fully into the school.