

Dave Snow

# PROMOTING EXCELLENCE

## ...OR ACTIVISM?

Equity, diversity, and inclusion at  
Canada's federal granting agencies



February 2025

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## Executive summary | *sommaire*

Higher education in Canada has reached a tenuous moment. For too long, it has focused on “equity, diversity, and inclusion” (EDI) at the expense of research excellence. This has occurred alongside a growing lack of viewpoint diversity among faculty and concerns over the erosion of academic freedom in Canada.

This report shows how EDI in its “Mild,” “Moderate,” and “Activist” forms has come to dominate both Canadian academia and government in general. Specifically, it reveals how EDI has taken root at Canada’s federal research granting agencies (NSERC, CIHR, and SSHRC), whose combined budget is \$3.95 billion and growing.

And while much of the EDI is either Mild (focused on broad, vague generalities without specific action) or Moderate (promoting specific equity-driven policies such as affirmative action) there is also a significant strain of Activist EDI that is pushing for sweeping reforms and explicitly seeking to advance the goals of critical social justice activism.

In Canada, EDI is currently taking up far too much focus in each of the granting agencies. Rather than prioritizing research excellence, they are too often promoting and even rewarding political activism. This EDI agenda is promoted through a host of initiatives, including:

- A Tri-Agency “EDI Action Plan.”
- Specialized grants on EDI-related topics.
- Grants and award criteria that prioritize funding on the basis of race, gender, and other identity characteristics.
- CIHR’s new definition of research excellence that encourages research that is “anti-racist, anti-ableist, and anti-colonial in approach and impact.”
- Mandatory diversity and bias training modules for applicants and peer reviewers.
- Ubiquitous terminology and guidelines that nudge applicants towards including EDI considerations in their applications.

The net effect has been to harm the perception of political independence and unbiased research that is crucial to any research funding agency. The harm is not yet irreparable — but reform is necessary.

This report offers several solutions to reform the federal granting agencies.

First and foremost, the agencies should commit to political and ideological neutrality. This means removing references to EDI from granting agency guidelines, eliminating EDI-focused grants, and removing “equity targets” and any preferential awards.

The federal government should not seek to ban EDI-driven research outright – EDI-focused research should continue to contribute to the marketplace of ideas. However, EDI-focused researchers should be required to make the case as to why their research is deserving of scarce taxpayer resources dedicated to objective knowledge creation, just as all other researchers do.

The influence of Activist EDI continues to spread throughout academia. However, the granting agencies have not yet been “taken over” by Activist EDI. Especially with respect to major grants and awards, most of the guidelines and policies at the granting agencies continue to promote research excellence, and the focus on EDI tends to be of the Mild or Moderate variety. The proportion of major grants awarded to projects using Activist EDI language, while higher than it should be, remains small in relative terms. Accordingly, there is significant scope for reforms that could remove EDI from the agencies’ priorities.

Unfortunately, there is little sign that the current federal government — under whom so much of the EDI push began — is interested in rolling back EDI. However, there is no reason why any future government needs to maintain the ubiquitous focus on EDI at federal granting agencies. Thankfully, there are signs of a pushback happening within academia, and recent surveys indicate that Canadians do not support Activist EDI and even the Moderate EDI of affirmative action. In the end, academia should reward innovation, be fuelled by research excellence, and always challenge ideas in the name of free expression. [MLI](#)

*L'éducation supérieure traverse une période difficile au Canada. Elle a trop longtemps privilégié « l'équité, la diversité et l'inclusion » (EDI) aux dépens de la qualité de la recherche. Cela, parallèlement à une diversité d'opinions de moins en moins manifeste au sein du corps professoral et une inquiétante diminution de la liberté d'enseignement.*

*Ce rapport présente une analyse des pratiques en matière d'EDI, qu'elles soient qualifiées de « souples », « modérées » ou « militantes », et met en lumière leur prévalence croissante tant dans les milieux académiques que dans les instances gouvernementales. Plus précisément, il illustre l'ampleur de leur intégration dans les organismes subventionnaires fédéraux (CRSNG, IRSC et CRSH), lesquels disposent collectivement d'un budget de 3,95 milliards de dollars, en constante augmentation.*

*Si, dans l'ensemble, les pratiques EDI sont soit souples (axées sur des généralités sans mesures précises) soit modérées (axées sur l'équité – notamment l'« action positive »),*

*une proportion notable de pratiques militantes visent l'instauration de réformes radicales et la promotion explicite d'un activisme critique dans la quête de justice sociale.*

*On attache bien trop d'importance aux pratiques EDI dans chacun des organismes subventionnaires. Plutôt que de privilégier la qualité de la recherche, ces pratiques tendent à favoriser, et même à récompenser trop souvent l'activisme politique. Le programme EDI est soutenu par un ensemble d'initiatives, notamment :*

- un « plan d'action des trois organismes pour l'EDI ».*
- des subventions spéciales sur des thèmes liés à l'EDI.*
- des critères pour les subventions et les bourses qui privilégient le financement sur la base de la catégorie raciale, du genre et d'autres caractéristiques identitaires.*
- la nouvelle définition de l'IRSC sur la qualité qui favorise les recherches « antiracistes, anticapacitistes et anticoloniales dans leur approche et leur impact ».*
- des modules de formation obligatoire sur la diversité et les préjugés à l'intention des candidats et des pairs évaluateurs.*
- une terminologie et des lignes directrices qui incitent de façon systématique les candidats à aborder les considérations liées à l'EDI dans leurs demandes de subvention.*

*Cela a nui à la façon dont on perçoit l'indépendance politique et la recherche objective, un élément crucial pour tout organisme subventionnaire. Le mal n'est pas encore devenu irréparable – mais une réforme s'impose.*

*Ce rapport propose plusieurs solutions de réforme destinées aux organismes subventionnaires fédéraux.*

*D'abord et avant tout, ces organismes doivent s'engager à faire preuve de neutralité politique et idéologique. Ils doivent donc éliminer toute référence à l'EDI dans leurs lignes directrices, les subventions liées à l'EDI, les « cibles concernant l'équité » et toutes les formes d'attributions préférentielles.*

*Le gouvernement fédéral ne devrait pas envisager d'interdire la recherche motivée par l'EDI; celle-ci doit continuer de contribuer au partage des idées. Néanmoins, il est impératif que les chercheurs en EDI soient soumis, au même titre que tous les autres, à l'obligation de justifier la nécessité de leurs travaux pour bénéficier des ressources limitées que nous confient les contribuables en vue d'acquérir des connaissances fiables.*

*L'EDI militant continue de gagner en influence dans les universités. Toutefois, il n'a pas encore « pris d'assaut » les organismes subventionnaires : leurs lignes directrices et politiques, en particulier pour les subventions et les bourses importantes, demeurent majoritairement orientées vers la promotion d'une recherche de qualité alors que l'accent a tendance à être mis sur l'EDI souple ou modéré. Le nombre de subventions majeures attribuées à des projets à caractère militant, bien que jugé excessif, demeure restreint. Par conséquent, il sera possible de réaliser des réformes ayant pour objectif de reléguer l'EDI au second plan des priorités de ces organismes.*

*Il est regrettable de constater qu'aucun indice ne laisse présager que le gouvernement fédéral en place – sous lequel l'EDI a pris tant de galon – envisage de faire marche arrière. Par contre, rien ne pourra contraindre un futur gouvernement à assurer l'omniprésence de l'EDI dans les organismes subventionnaires fédéraux. Heureusement, il y a des signes de résistance dans le milieu académique alors que des enquêtes récentes révèlent que la population canadienne ne soutient pas l'EDI militant, ni même l'« action positive » liée à l'EDI modéré. En définitive, le milieu académique se doit de valoriser l'innovation, de poursuivre l'excellence en matière de recherche et de constamment remettre en question les idées, dans le respect de la liberté d'expression. **MLI***



## Introduction

In Canadian government and academia, equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI)<sup>1</sup> is now all-consuming. Over the past several years, the federal Liberal government has fully embraced EDI, anti-racism, and “lived experience” as essential to the public service (Canada 2024c, 2024d). In higher education, the EDI bureaucracy has become institutionally entrenched. Disciplinary organizations in political science and history have embraced EDI, while entire universities such as Concordia have committed themselves to “decolonizing” their curriculum (Canadian Historical Association 2021; Canadian Political Science Association 2022; Bartlett 2023).

It should come as no surprise that EDI is increasingly present at the institutions that exist where the federal bureaucracy and academia intersect – federal granting agencies that provide research funding to higher education researchers and institutions. Yet there have been no systematic attempts to explore precisely *how* EDI has been integrated into the policies and priorities for Canada’s three federal granting agencies: the National Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC), the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). That is what this report seeks to do.

This report comes at a tenuous moment for Canadian higher education. There is increasing evidence of a lack of viewpoint diversity among predominantly left-leaning faculty (Dummitt and Patterson 2022). Structural budget deficits at many universities are set to be compounded by an impending decline in international student enrolment due to federal changes to student immigration policy (Friesen 2024; Wong 2024). Meanwhile, the federal Conservatives – a party that has been publicly critical of academia and the excesses of university activism (Lévesque 2022) – appear likely to



form the next federal government. If a new government looks to cut spending, the federal granting agencies, which were forecast to spend \$3.95 billion in the 2024/25 fiscal year even before a 2024 budget increase, will likely be near the top of the list.

It is thus vitally important that the Canadian public has a better understanding of the federal granting agencies – what they ought to do, what they actually do, and how well they do it. In what follows, I examine granting agency guidelines, policies, and budgets, and demonstrate that the three federal granting agencies have become infused with EDI considerations. I also provide an empirical examination of data from both NSERC and SSHRC showing there has been an increase over time in grants with EDI-focused activist language.

“ *What is the purpose of funding research? Is it to advance objective knowledge... or change society in a politically programmatic way?* ”

These results will likely provide fodder for critics of EDI, and could lead to calls for large-scale funding reductions at the federal granting agencies. However, I also show that all is not lost at these granting agencies. Each agency retains an explicit commitment to research excellence at the core of their mission, although at CIHR even this has been watered down with EDI considerations (CIHR 2024k). In addition, the evidence from major grants awarded by SSHRC suggests that they have not been “taken over” by the critical social justice activism that EDI promotes. As such, I provide several recommendations to reform these institutions. At their core, these reforms reflect the principle of political and ideological neutrality. If the granting agencies can remain committed to this principle – first and foremost by eliminating EDI considerations – they can continue serve Canadian universities and the Canadian public for decades to come.

This report poses an existential question regarding our federal granting agencies: What is the purpose of funding research? Is it to advance objective

knowledge, build capacity, and foster even greater future research capacity? Or is it to change society in a politically programmatic way? Reading through the granting agencies' policies, guidelines, and priorities, the current answer seems to be "both." The agencies clearly believe that EDI and research excellence are mutually reinforcing. However, this report shows that EDI considerations have contributed to the politicization of research priorities and have fostered an environment that encourages researchers to signal certain political priorities to gain access to research funding. To maintain the faith of the public and the research community, any whiff of politicization needs to be abolished. The first step should be to remove any reference to equity, diversity, and inclusion at our federal granting agencies.

This remainder of this report is divided into five main sections. First, I describe each of the three federal granting agencies, including their statutory mandate and budgets. Second, I describe the extent to which EDI has manifested in each agency in terms of guidelines and award considerations. I show how these agencies oscillate between three variants of EDI, which I call Mild, Moderate, and Activist EDI. Third, I present and analyze longitudinal quantitative data on the extent to which EDI terminology has penetrated SSHRC (1998–2021) and NSERC (1990–2022) over the last three decades. These results show EDI terminology has appeared with greater frequency in awards from SSHRC in particular, with moderate evidence of EDI penetration at NSERC.

Fourth, I provide a content analysis of the extent to which EDI considerations have affected the grants SSHRC has awarded from 2022–24. This provides the clearest indication yet of the extent that EDI has affected SSHRC awards, including some of that agency's most prestigious awards. Fifth, I provide recommendations for reform, most notably the removal of all EDI requirements and EDI language from federal granting agencies' awards and guidelines, alongside a commitment to political and ideological neutrality. These reforms can enable these granting agencies to refocus their efforts on funding research that can continue to enhance our understanding of the world and improve the lives of Canadians.

## The federal granting agencies: SSHRC, NSERC, and CIHR

While provinces have primary jurisdiction over post-secondary education, the federal government is the main source of research funding that flows to these institutions, including the researchers and graduate students operating within them. The primary source of federal research funding in Canada comes from three granting agencies that are collectively known as the “Tri-Agency” or “Tri-Council.” Those three agencies are:

- The Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC), responsible for funding the hard sciences and engineering.
- The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), responsible for funding the social sciences and humanities.
- The Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), which is subdivided into 13 virtual and interdisciplinary “institutes,” which it defines as “networks of researchers brought together to focus on important health problems.” CIHR is responsible for funding medical and health-related research.

Each granting agency’s authority is derived from a federal statute, and the agencies fall under the remit of different ministries. The Minister of Innovation, Science, and Industry is responsible for SSHRC and NSERC, while the Minister of Health is responsible for CIHR. The three agencies operate independently but also coordinate through the Canada Research Coordinating Committee (CRCC). SSHRC also administers the Research Support Fund (RSF) on behalf of all three agencies, which provides indirect support to postsecondary institutions. The Tri-agency Institution Programs Secretariat (TIPS) provides day-to-day administration of the RSF and is also responsible for administration of the Canada Research Chairs program (Canada Research Chairs 2019; Research Support Fund 2019).

The structure of SSHRC and NSERC, as outlined in their enabling legislation, is nearly identical (*Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Act 1985*; *Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council Act 1985*). CIHR’s legislation is structured slightly differently and includes more details about its objectives and responsibilities. All three agencies are legally established as corporations governed by a president and council; CIHR’s council also

includes a chairperson. All presidents and council members are appointed by the governor in council, which in practice means the federal Cabinet, and they serve “during pleasure” (Canada 2024e). Although under ministerial direction and subject to a statutory mandate, in practice the three agencies operate with considerable autonomy.

The legislative objectives of the three agencies place a strong emphasis on research excellence. SSHRC’s two legislative functions are to “promote and assist research and scholarship in the social sciences and humanities” and to advise the minister; NSERC’s functions are likewise to “promote and assist research in the natural sciences and engineering, other than the health sciences” and to advise the minister. CIHR’s legislative objectives are spelled out in far more detail, but its overarching objective is “to excel, according to internationally accepted standards of scientific excellence, in the creation of new knowledge and its translation into improved health for Canadians, more effective health services and products and a strengthened Canadian health care system” (*Canadian Institutes of Health Research Act*, 2000, s. 4). Notably, there is no mention of equity, diversity, or inclusion in any of the agencies’ enabling legislation, apart from the preamble of the *CIHR Act*, which states that “health research should address the respective health issues of children, women and men and of the diverse populations of Canada.”

Unlike independent research institutions in other countries, neither NSERC, SSHRC, nor CIHR do in-house research. Instead, the granting agencies are modelled in such a way as to fund research that will be conducted at universities and other research institutions by independent researchers. Most federal granting agency expenditures therefore come in the form of awards and grants. These awards and grants are typically provided to graduate students, postdoctoral researchers, postsecondary faculty, and other researchers who apply via open competitions for funds through the federal granting agencies’ websites. Although research topics are selected by individual researchers themselves, the granting agencies often have priority areas that the government can set. For example, SSHRC offers “knowledge synthesis grants” on priority issues that the federal government has identified as part of future global challenges, with recent grants for gender-based violence, shifting dynamics of privilege and marginalization, and evolving narratives of cultures and histories (SSHRC 2024n). Grants, scholarships, and fellowships from the three granting agencies are generally considered among the most

prestigious and sought-after by graduate students, researchers, and faculty at Canadian universities.

Disciplinary experts largely make the decisions about which individual grants get funded. Health researchers decide which health projects receive funding; engineers and natural scientists decide which engineering and natural science projects receive funding; and social scientists and humanities scholars decide which social science and humanities projects receive funding. They do this largely through the process of “merit review.” As SSHRC describes, the independent merit review process is “designed to ensure the highest standards of excellence and impartiality” and is “a transparent, in-depth and effective way to allocate public research funds” (SSHRC 2023e). While the merit review process differs from award to award, it generally involves a committee of researchers evaluating dozens if not hundreds of applications from scholars from fields that are proximate to their own research expertise. Depending on the award, external reviewers who are subject matter experts also assess applications. For its Insight Award, for example, SSHRC defines the process as follows:

Committee members read an entire cohort of applications, along with the relevant assessments provided by external assessors. Members, as a group, then evaluate and rank all the proposals assigned to their committee. Merit review committees consider *but are not bound by* the judgments of the external assessors. (SSHRC 2024g; emphasis in original.)

In the merit review process, candidates are assessed based on specific criteria. The standard SSHRC criteria is split between 40 per cent for Challenge (“The aim and importance of the endeavour”), 40 per cent for Capability (“The expertise to succeed”), and 20 per cent for Feasibility (“The plan to achieve excellence”) (SSHRC 2024g). These committees rank applicants and eventually notify them if they are successful. For successful applicants, funds are typically distributed through their home institution. (Full disclosure: I currently hold a SSHRC Insight Grant and I have held several SSHRC awards throughout my academic career. I have also sat on the University of Guelph’s SSHRC “Institutional Grant” award committee since 2022, which assesses applications for small internal SSHRC-funded awards.)

The institutional superstructure above the granting agencies may be changing. In Budget 2024 the federal government announced plans to create a

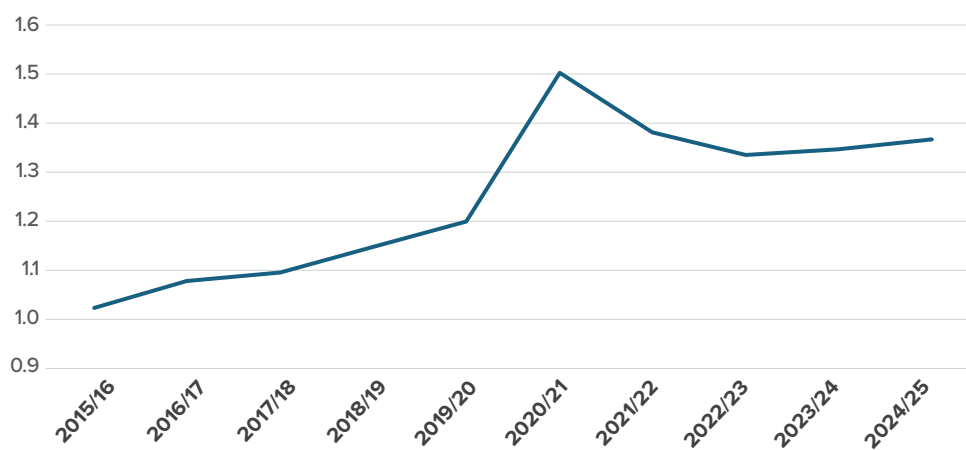
“new capstone research funding organization” within which the three granting councils would continue to exist (Canada 2024f, 171). In 2024, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Science and Research began a study into the nature of such a capstone organization, which was initially recommended by the 2023 Advisory Panel on the Federal Research Support System (Standing Committee on Science and Research 2024a; Canada 2023).

## Granting agency budgets and expenditures

Each of the three federal granting agencies is primarily responsible for funding and overseeing grants, fellowships, scholarships, and programs for graduate students and researchers. The following budget information is derived from publicly available departmental plans and reports for each agency (CIHR 2024a; NSERC 2024l; SSHRC 2024j). All spending amounts in Figures 1–4 for 2023/24 and 2024/25 are “planned” spending according to the agencies’ departmental plans; these numbers predate the federal government’s announcement in Budget 2024 to increase funding to the granting agencies by approximately 30 per cent. For all three agencies, expenditures were highest in 2020/21 due to a temporary COVID-19 emergency funding infusion.<sup>2</sup>

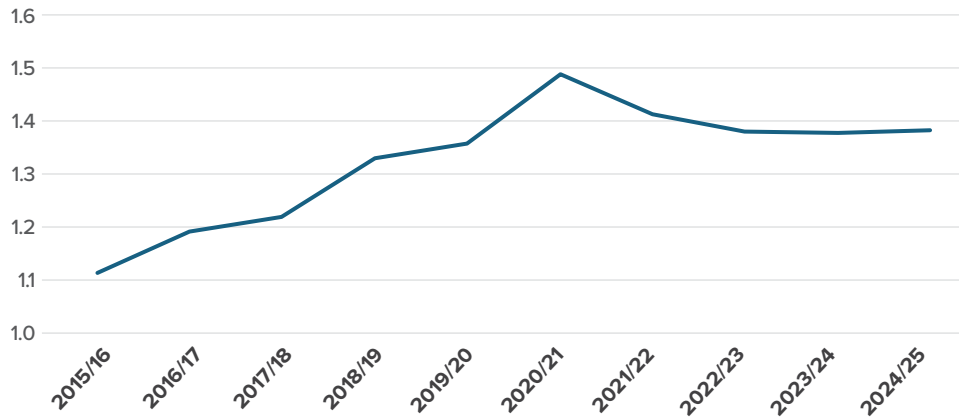
Figure 1 tracks CIHR’s total expenditures from 2015/16 to 2024/25 (planned), which increased from \$1.03 billion to \$1.37 billion (with a high of

**FIGURE 1:** CIHR total spending, 2015/16 – 2024/25 (billions)



Source: CIHR 2024a.

**FIGURE 2:** NSERC total spending, 2015/16 – 2024/25 (billions)



Source: NSERC 2024i.

\$1.5 billion spent during 2020/21 because of COVID-19 emergency funding). CIHR’s “internal services” (broadly speaking, general management and overhead) took up 3.0 per cent of its annual budget in 2022/23 (CIHR 2023, 22).

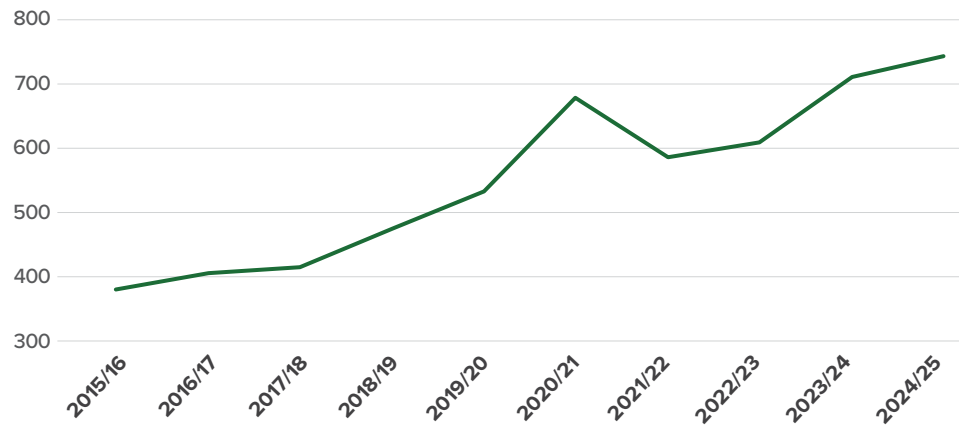
Figure 2 shows that NSERC’s overall expenditures are similar to CIHR’s, with approximately \$1.38 billion planned to be spent in 2024/25. NSERC’s “internal services” (general management and overhead) took up 1.7 per cent of its annual budget in 2022/2023 (NSERC 2024m).

SSHRC’s budget is slightly more complicated, as SSHRC is responsible for what is known as the “Institutional Support for the Indirect Cost of Research,” which funds postsecondary institutions to “reimburse a portion of indirect costs associated” with Tri-Agency funded research (SSHRC 2024k, 17). SSHRC operates this “institutional support” component through the Research Support Fund (RSF) on behalf of all three granting agencies. SSHRC was also responsible for the administration and distribution of some of the COVID-19 emergency funds in 2020/21. Thus, while technically included in SSHRC’s budget, both the “institutional support” component and the administration of COVID-19 emergency funds are excluded from SSHRC’s budget expenditures in Figure 3 and listed as separate expenditures in Figure 4.

As Figure 3 shows, SSHRC’s annual expenditures (excluding institutional support and the administration of COVID-19 emergency funding) has grown substantially: SSHRC’s remaining budget went from

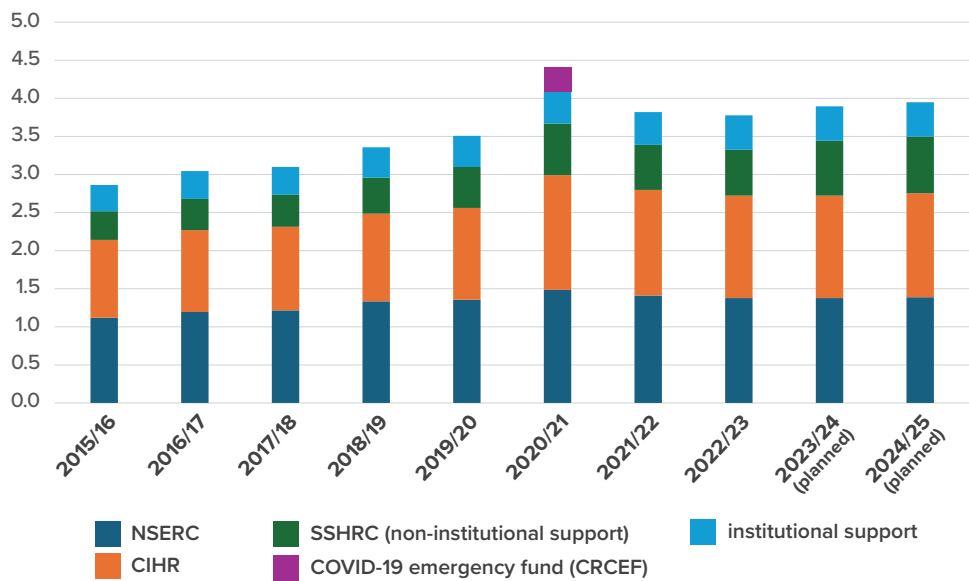


**FIGURE 3: SSHRC expenditures (millions, excluding Tri-Agency administered)**



Source: SSHRC 2024j.

**FIGURE 4: Tri-Agency funding (billions)**



Source: Canada 2021a; Canada 2021b; CIHR 2021, 18; CIHR 2024a; NSERC 2021, 22; NSERC 2024i; SSHRC 2021a, 21; SSHRC 2024j. Calculations by author.

\$380 million in 2015/16 to \$745 million planned for 2024/25, a 96 per cent increase (see Figure 3).

Figure 4 shows all the federal granting council expenditures from 2015/16 to 2024/25 (planned), with SSHRC’s “institutional support” component and COVID-19 administration presented as standalone expenditures. Several conclusions can be drawn. First, the amount of expenditure is considerable: the

three granting agencies were already forecast to spend \$3.95 billion in 2024/25, even before a new funding increase in Budget 2024 (described below). For all three agencies, the influx of spending in 2020/2021 due to emergency COVID-related funding remains the high-water mark for granting agency spending, with a total of \$4.41 billion spent that year.

Second, the spending has increased considerably over the last decade. Top-line federal granting agency expenditures have increased 38 per cent between 2015/16 and projected spending in 2024/2025, even before accounting for the Budget 2024 increase.

Third, the nature of the increase has varied depending on the agency. Between 2015/16 and the projected 2024/25 allocation, NSERC's increase was 24 per cent – below the 27 per cent inflation rate during that period (Bank of Canada 2024). By contrast, the rate of increased spending between 2015/16 and 2024/25 was 33 per cent for institutional support, 33 per cent for CIHR, and 96 per cent for SSHRC.

Finally, such funding is scheduled to increase substantially. The 2024 federal budget included an increase in \$1.8 billion over five years for the federal granting agencies, with an additional \$743.8 million ongoing after that (Canada 2024f, 171; Wells 2024). As SSHRC (2024m) notes, this constitutes “a 30% top up to existing agency programs.” If such funding comes into effect, the lines on all the above charts will trend upward at a higher rate in the coming years.

## **Equity, diversity, and inclusion at the federal granting agencies**

Equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) has become ubiquitous throughout government, business, and especially academia in North America. However, precisely what is meant by EDI (or, in the American context, DEI) varies from institution to institution. In what follows, I create a three-part scheme for classifying EDI, distinguishing between its Mild, Moderate, and Activist forms.

Mild EDI uses the language of equity, diversity, and inclusion in broad, vague generalities. It emphasizes terms such as inclusion and diversity but

typically avoids making concrete policy proposals apart from imprecise commitments to remove “systemic barriers.” An example of Mild EDI comes from the Canada Research Coordinating Committee (CRCC), which is the coordinating agency for NSERC, SSHRC, and CIHR. The CRCC defines the three components of EDI as follows:

- **Equity** is defined as the removal of systemic barriers (e.g., unconscious bias, discrimination, racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, etc.), enabling all individuals to have equitable opportunity to access and benefit from the program.
- **Diversity** is about the variety of unique dimensions, identities, qualities and characteristics individuals possess along with other identity factors.
- **Inclusion** is defined as the practice of ensuring that all individuals are valued and respected for their contributions and are supported equitably in a culturally safe environment (SSHRC 2024i).

By contrast, Moderate EDI uses “equity, diversity, and inclusion” (especially equity) as a substitute for “affirmative action” or what in Canada is typically called “employment equity.” The goal of Canada’s federal affirmative action policy, the *Employment Equity Act*, is to “correct the conditions of disadvantage in employment” for women, visible minorities, persons with disabilities, and Indigenous peoples in a way that “requires special measures and the accommodation of differences experienced” (s. 2). Section 15(2) of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* permits governments to engage in affirmative action for disadvantaged individuals or groups.

In the context of federal granting agencies, Moderate EDI entails making concrete requirements for preferential hiring, award considerations, or organizational representation for marginalized or underrepresented groups. Canada’s federal granting agencies often adopt Moderate EDI using the language of “equity targets” to increase representation for women, persons with disabilities, Indigenous peoples, LGBTQ-identifying individuals, and visible minorities.

Finally, Activist EDI recommends sweeping reform to overcome systemic barriers for people from historically marginalized identity groups. Activist EDI draws extensively from concepts that are prominent in critical social justice activism, which others have defined as “wokeness,” “cultural socialism,” or the “identity synthesis” (see Kaufmann 2024a, 2024b; Mounk 2023). Language

related to Activist EDI has become increasingly common at Canadian universities with emphasis often placed on intersectionality, anti-racism, decolonization, and “dismantling whiteness” (Canadian Political Science Association 2022; University of Guelph 2022; UBC 2024; Western Health Sciences 2022).

I define Activist EDI as *the use of the language of equity, diversity, and inclusion to advance the goals of critical social justice activism*. This definition is broadly consistent with what Eric Kaufmann (2024a, 9) has called “woke cultural socialism,” which views society “as structured by power hierarchies of white supremacy, patriarchy, and cis-heteronormativity” and aims to “overthrow systems of structural racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia.” In contrast to Moderate or Mild EDI, Activist EDI typically uses the terminology of equity, diversity, and inclusion alongside calls to “dismantle” or “disrupt” the work of existing institutions, rather than merely improving the representation of underrepresented groups within them. Activist EDI is inherently politicized and ideological. It is, in my view, incompatible with the creation of objective, falsifiable knowledge.

This distinction between Mild, Moderate, and Activist EDI can help us better understand how EDI is framed by different researchers and institutions, including Canada’s federal granting agencies. As I show below, while the different versions of EDI manifest themselves in different ways at the federal granting agencies, there is often conceptual slippage even within the same set of guidelines. This can create mixed messaging for researchers, students, and the broader public at large, leaving them uncertain about what EDI actually requires.

## **EDI from the top down at the granting agencies**

The commitment to EDI at the federal granting agencies is ubiquitous. The Canada Research Coordinating Committee (CRCC) website has a detailed section entitled “Best practices in equity, diversity and inclusion in research practice and design,” which commits granting agencies to “supporting equitable access to funding opportunities for all researchers and trainees; promoting the integration of EDI-related considerations in research design and practices; increasing equitable and inclusive participation in the research system, including on research teams; and collecting the data and conducting the analyses needed to include EDI considerations in decision-making” (CRCC 2024).

In addition, the granting agencies have a *Tri-Agency EDI Action Plan for 2018–2025*, which begins from the premise that “more needs to be done” to “address systemic barriers” (NSERC 2024b). The *EDI Action Plan* contains many of the broad commitments to diversity common to corporate and government EDI initiatives – the Mild EDI that offers vague descriptions of the importance of a more diverse and inclusive environment. For example, the *EDI Action Plan* “recognize[s] that First Nations, Métis and Inuit are rights-holding as First Peoples of Canada” and sets out to “create a culture where embedding equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) considerations into all aspects of research is second nature” (NSERC 2024b).

Yet the *EDI Action Plan* also contains concrete commitments in the form of Moderate EDI “equity targets”: objectives and performance indicators to increase the representation of certain groups. It is aimed at a broad set of “underrepresented groups,” which “include, but are not limited to, women, Indigenous Peoples (First Nations, Inuit, and Métis), persons with disabilities, members of visible minority/racialized groups and members of LGBTQ2+ communities” (NSERC 2024b). As I have noted elsewhere, SSHRC in particular has increased the proportion of grants awarded to women, persons with a disability, and visible minority recipients in recent years, with the proportion of women recipients from 2019–2022 (between 53 and 56 per cent each year) outperforming women’s proportion of the population (51 per cent) and of university faculty (49 per cent) (Snow 2024).

The *EDI Action Plan* has two primary goals. The first goal is “Fair access to tri-agency research support.” To meet this goal, granting agencies target year-over-year improvement in the application rates, award rates, and application-award differential of underrepresented groups for grants, scholarships, and prize nominations. To that end, the *EDI Action Plan* identifies several initiatives that range from comprehensive EDI data collection and monitoring to providing staff and peer-reviewers with EDI training. The second goal is “Equitable participation in the research system.” To meet this goal, the target is to increase the proportion of teachers, researchers, and students at postsecondary institutions from underrepresented groups. Initiatives within this goal include the implementation of “an institutional EDI capacity-building grants program,” establishing a Tri-Agency EDI policy, implementing a Canada Research Chairs Program EDI Action Plan, and the creation of an EDI pilot project named “Dimensions: Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Canada” (NSERC 2024b).

The three granting agencies jointly ran the Dimensions program, a five-year \$3.6 million pilot program that concluded in 2023 and was not renewed (Couturier 2024; Qaiser and Coen-Sanchez 2024). It consisted of two components, one of which was simply providing public recognition to postsecondary institutions that showed a strong commitment to EDI (NSERC 2023d; NSERC 2024j). The more visible component was the creation of an “EDI Charter” which outlined a number of principles regarding EDI, including “the need to identify and address systemic barriers”; that “Diversity is one of Canada’s strengths, which positively contributes to research excellence”; and that “An in-depth and intersectional understanding of inequity, discrimination and exclusion is needed to achieve cultural change” (NSERC 2024k).

*Because EDI is so prevalent throughout the [three research organizations], it is not currently possible to determine the share of the budgets of each that is devoted to EDI initiatives.*

In many ways, the EDI Charter shows the difficulty of committing to research excellence while emphasizing EDI. On the one hand, the EDI Charter mentions the importance of data collection and analysis “to measure, monitor, understand and publicly report on challenges and progress made.” It contains multiple references to “research excellence” and makes the case that EDI and research excellence are complementary. On the other hand, the EDI Charter suggests it already knows the answers to the questions researchers will pose, insofar as the collected data “should inform a comprehensive, in-depth, intersectional understanding of the contexts, manifestations and experiences that result from inequities.” Its nod to intersectionality and the desirability of cultural change constitutes evidence that Activist EDI has crept into the federal granting agencies. Although the Dimensions program was cancelled, the EDI Charter remains prominently displayed on the “Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion” section of NSERC’s website.

Because EDI is so prevalent throughout the three organizations, it is not currently possible to determine the share of the budgets of each that is devoted to EDI initiatives. The agencies' annual departmental plans and departmental results reports do not provide specific EDI-related line items, and the *Tri-Agency EDI Action Plan* did not provide specific costing (NSERC 2024b). One-time EDI-focused grants, such as the \$19.2 million "Race, Gender and Diversity Initiative" co-funded by SSRHC and CIHR (SSHRC 2023d), take up a relatively small overall proportion of the agencies' budget. However, the ongoing overhead costs of the numerous EDI initiatives – ranging from action plans to equity target monitoring to the ongoing development of new EDI policies and guidelines – are likely substantial. The further integration of EDI into the granting agencies' priorities will only increase the direct and indirect cost of implementing equity, diversity, and inclusion.

### *Equity, diversity, and inclusion at NSERC*

Although natural sciences and engineering are, in theory, the fields most removed from considerations of equity, diversity, and inclusion, EDI features quite prominently at NSERC. EDI has become increasingly embedded into application requirements; specialized programs, grants, and scholarships; and even requirements for peer reviewers. Currently, most EDI initiatives at NSERC are either what I refer to as Mild EDI (fostering inclusion and diversity more broadly) or Moderate EDI (affirmative action-style prioritization of applicants coming from marginalized groups). Activist EDI has yet to manifest itself at NSERC.

NSERC's website notes that the agency "is embedding EDI considerations into the application requirements and selection criteria of its funding opportunities" and that "a number of NSERC's funding opportunities are designed to address barriers and biases experienced by underrepresented groups and to promote EDI" (NSERC 2023a). These include programs for faculty such as the Chairs for Women in Science and Engineering (between \$40,000 and \$70,000 per year), Chairs for Inclusion in Science and Engineering (a jointly run program with the *Fonds de recherche du Québec* for at least \$160,000 per year), and "Discovery Horizons": interdisciplinary grants of \$50,000 to \$100,000 per year, which prioritizes to "those who self-identify as members of underrepresented groups" and requires a training plan that integrates "[a]ppropriate considerations of equity, diversity and inclusion" (NSERC 2023b, 2024a, 2024c).



NSERC lists several EDI-focused programs for students and postdoctoral fellows, including NSERC Indigenous Student Ambassadors, the Indigenous Scholars Award and Supplements Pilot Initiatives, and the NSERC and L'Oréal-UNESCO For Women in Science Supplement (NSERC 2024d). NSERC also ran an “EDI Institutional Capacity-Building Grant” in 2021, which offered up to \$200,000 for two years for smaller postsecondary institutions (NSERC 2022a). EDI is also present in the peer review process; NSERC notes that peer review committees “must take the Bias in Peer Review training module” and that committee composition guidelines include “requirements for diversity in terms of knowledge and experience, language, equity and inclusion, sector and region” (NSERC 2024g).

NSERC collects data on gender, visible minorities, Indigenous peoples, and persons with disabilities in its competition statistics. It presents this data in five different “dashboards” organized by award type, with data available from 2019 to 2023. This data comes from self-identification questionnaires that ask questions related to “birth, gender identity, sexual orientation, Indigenous identity, visible minorities, population group, persons with a disability and languages.” NSERC also notes that it uses this data to apply Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA Plus), an “intersectional analysis approach,” to its funding (NSERC 2024e).

Finally, NSERC provides guidelines for its applicants explaining how to integrate EDI considerations into their training plans in order to increase the success rate of their grant applications. To achieve an “exceptional” ranking on EDI considerations, for example, NSERC encourages applicants to plan “[a]n annual audit of proposed EDI-related actions in your research environment” and to use “anonymous trainee feedback surveys to measure sense of inclusion and/or identify persistent barriers” once the project begins (NSERC 2024f).

### ***Equity, diversity, and inclusion at CIHR***

EDI features even more prominently at CIHR than NSERC. CIHR is the one agency where EDI considerations are manifest in multiple frameworks, initiatives, and criteria. EDI language at CIHR has taken on Mild, Moderate, and Activist forms, with Activist EDI becoming more prominent. It has even crept directly into CIHR's new research excellence framework, which encourages research that is “anti-racist, anti-ableist, and anti-colonial in approach and impact” (CIHR 2024k).

Equity, diversity, and inclusion is listed as one of CIHR’s “Priority Areas,” and the agency lists nine issues related to “EDI in Action at CIHR.” These range from systemic racism in health research funding to improving paid parental leave to the need for “systemic changes... to mitigate barriers faced by underrepresented groups—including women, Francophone researchers, Indigenous Peoples and organizations, persons with disabilities and Black and other communities marginalized by race” (CIHR 2024c). CIHR also links to 25 individual resources related to fostering EDI in the research environment, including NSERC’s *Guide for Applicants: Considering Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in your Application*, Universities Canada Principles on Indigenous Education, the Implicit Association Test, resources on integrating sex and gender, and numerous Canada Research Chair documents pertaining to EDI

“ *EDI language at CIHR has taken on Mild, Moderate, and Activist forms, with Activist EDI becoming more prominent.* ”

(CIHR 2024d). CIHR has a “Gender Equity Framework” and is developing an Anti-Racism Action Plan and has an External Advisory Committee on Accessibility and Systemic Ableism (CIHR 2024e, 2024f). CIHR requires peer reviewers to take the Tri-Agency’s “Bias in Peer Review” module.

Recently, CIHR has institutionalized the Moderate EDI of affirmative action into how it awards its prestigious Project Grants, which will distribute a combined \$650 million in the fall of 2024 and winter 2025. For the fall 2024 competition, CIHR announced that it will “equalize Project Grant applications from nominated principal investigators (NPIs) who self-identify as a racialized person or who self-identify as a person with a disability,” and that “this equalization will ensure that the proportion of funded grants awarded to these groups is at least equal to the proportion of applications received from them” (CIHR 2024i).

In terms of its “action” on EDI, CIHR astonishingly boasts that it “Removed first class average (A+) as an eligibility criterion” for Canada’s

most prestigious scholarships “to enable a more unbiased, holistic review of applicants” – implicitly suggesting that members of underrepresented groups are less capable of receiving an A+ average than others (CIHR 2024c). Unlike SSHRC and NSERC, CIHR does not appear to have a dashboard that presents data on award recipients according to group representation, though its gender equity analysis does contain data on gender and funding up to 2017. CIHR also lists some identity-based data for its 2020 COVID-19 “Rapid Research Funding Opportunity” funding (CIHR 2024g, 2024h).

Activist EDI has also crept into certain CIHR initiatives. In May 2022, CIHR organized a virtual workshop called “Action for Disrupting White Supremacy and Racism in Public Health Systems.” The workshop report, published in 2023, included heavy criticisms of “Whiteness,” which “continues to oppress people from Indigenous, Black and other racialized communities.” The report also included a poem that participants created entitled “What a wonderful day to breathe, a day where humanity precedes White supremacy.” The poem envisions a day when “‘White women tears’ [are] no longer used as a weaponry,” “People of colour are no longer murdered in healthcare by White supremacy,” and “Public health is no longer run by nauseating Whiteness” [sic] (Population and Public Health 2023, 30, 50–51).

More substantively (and more worryingly), CIHR has recently redefined its definition of “research excellence” to include EDI considerations:

CIHR believes that excellent research is rigorous, inclusive and conducted in ways that meaningfully integrate a diversity of perspectives, disciplines, and methods in order to maximize impact and benefit to society.

Excellent research recognizes that biological, socio-economic, cultural and experiential differences impact health and should be considered for research and related activities to be of benefit. An inclusive concept of research excellence positively influences who sets research priorities; who conducts, participates in and benefits from research; how research is conducted; and how it is assessed. (CIHR 2024k)

While the definition itself does not elaborate on what is meant by “inclusive” and “diversity,” the subsequent information contained in CIHR’s

new research excellence framework lists EDI as a “key component” of research excellence. It states that “Research is excellent when it is inclusive, equitable, diverse, anti-racist, anti-ableist, and anti-colonial in approach and impact” (CIHR 2024k). The page also links to several sources critiquing the very idea of research excellence, including an article titled “‘Excellence R Us’: University Research and the Fetishisation of Excellence” (Moore et al. 2017).

CIHR’s new definition of research excellence is arguably the clearest indication of Activist EDI affecting the way in which the quality of research is determined by any of the federal granting agencies, with “anti-racist, anti-ableist, and anti-colonial” research deemed *de facto* excellent. Canada’s leading funding agency for medical and health-related research is now actively dismissing traditional notions of scientific excellence in favour of “inclusive metrics” and intersectionality. The creep of Activist EDI language into CIHR’s definition of research excellence clearly indicates that health and medical research funding has become politicized.

### ***Equity, diversity, and inclusion at SSHRC***

EDI considerations are also prevalent at SSHRC. While the form of EDI promoted by SSHRC is not as explicitly activist as at CIHR, EDI considerations of one form or another are prominent across every element of SSHRC. This is especially true with respect to scholarships and guidelines for research design.

SSHRC’s main EDI page links to 13 different EDI-related programs and initiatives created by SSHRC or the Tri-Agency, including a detailed description of how to integrate EDI considerations “in research practice and research design” (SSHRC 2022a). SSHRC has also established multiple advisory committees and projects, including an Action Plan for Black Researchers, an Advisory Committee of Accessibility and Systemic Ableism, and the Race, Gender, and Diversity Initiative, described in more detail below (SSHRC 2024a). Like NSERC, SSHRC publishes EDI-related data in a public dashboard that measures the application and award rates for applicants who are women, Indigenous, visible minorities, or persons with disabilities from 2018 to 2023 (SSHRC 2023c; see Snow 2024). Like NSERC and CIHR, SSHRC’s merit review committee members are expected to take a “Bias in Peer Review” module, which the Tri-Agencies developed as “part of their commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion” (Canada undated).

Unlike CIHR, SSHRC has not entirely reframed its definition of research excellence to include Activist EDI. However, SSHRC clearly views EDI as complementary to research excellence, stating that “EDI-focused measures” can both “boost participation and inclusion of underrepresented and disadvantaged groups” and “increase the excellence of research projects, by valuing and fostering the inclusion of diverse experiences, approaches, knowledge and ways of knowing” (SSHRC 2022b).

EDI requirements have also begun to manifest into some SSHRC grants and awards, mostly at the graduate and postdoctoral level. SSHRC announced in 2022 that it is “piloting EDI requirements in SSHRC-specific funding opportunities, namely its doctoral programs, postdoctoral fellowships and Partnership Grants” (SSHRC 2022a). PhD and postdoctoral award applicants now must complete a “Diversity Considerations in Research Design Module” during their application process. According to SSHRC, the module:

... promotes research excellence by encouraging you to reflect on how your research design can be strengthened by considering diversity and identity factors such as, but not limited to, age, disability, education, ethnicity, gender expression and gender identity, immigrant and newcomer status, Indigenous identity, language, neurodiversity, parental status/responsibility, place of origin, race, religion, sexual orientation and socio-economic status. (SSHRC 2023a)

SSHRC’s description of the module sends mixed messages regarding the extent to which EDI considerations are mandatory. On the one hand, SSHRC insists that “While completing the module is mandatory for SSHRC doctoral and postdoctoral applicants, this part of your application will *not be subject to merit review this year*. For the moment, it serves to build awareness among applicants, supervisors and institutions” (2023a, emphasis in original). On the other hand, SSHRC’s description of the module explicitly encourages applicants to engage with EDI considerations: SSHRC states that “Recognizing diversity enables a better, fuller understanding of experiences and perspectives, and can help address the barriers and disadvantages some individuals face based on their identities and relations to power” and that “Not integrating diversity can lead to misrepresentative or inaccurate results, misapplication of findings, and missed opportunities” (SSHRC 2023a).

SSHRC does not explicitly say that SSHRC-funded research *requires* researchers to “advance inclusion and equity”; it notes that “[s]ome research projects may target such outcomes, or use an anti-oppression or social justice lens, while others may not.” However, the same section contains not-so-subtle hints to researchers: “Although diversity considerations may not, at first, seem applicable to your research, do fully consider their relevance before selecting ‘No.’ You must provide your justification whether or not you deem diversity considerations relevant to your research” (SSHRC 2023a).

## The creep of Activist EDI into federal granting agencies

Overall, the three federal granting agencies are completely infused with EDI considerations. The Mild EDI of vague commitments to diversity is ever-present. However, there is also considerable Moderate EDI in the form of affirmative action: the equity targets of the *EDI Action Plan* coupled with the agencies’ publication of annual data on the proportion of underrepresented groups receiving awards is at the very least suggestive of preferential allocation of awards to certain underrepresented groups. The agencies have also moved towards implementing explicit quotas for underrepresented groups, most notably with CIHR’s “equalization” to ensure the number of self-identified racialized persons and persons with a disability will receive awards in proportion to the number of applicants (CIHR 2024i). Likewise, the Canada Research Chairs program – whose administration is housed within SSHRC – has explicit equity targets, requires participating institutions “to consider intersectionality in the allocation of their chairs moving forward,” and has resulted in the posting of jobs that have explicitly excluded male and white candidates from applying (Canada Research Chairs 2023; Dawson 2024; Sarkonak 2024b; University of New Brunswick 2023).

While Activist EDI language is rarer among the federal granting agencies’ official policies and guidelines, it is nevertheless creeping in. For example, SSHRC’s Advisory Committee to Address Anti-Black Racism in Research and Research Training approvingly describes the field of Black Studies as “counterinsurgent to the ways of white supremacy, anti-Blackness, colonialism, and neo-colonialism of African peoples wherever they reside” (SSHRC 2023f). Likewise, NSERC’s guide on integrating EDI into research claims that “Equity aims to eliminate disparities and disproportions that are rooted



in historical and contemporary injustices and oppression” (NSERC 2023c). CIHR’s new framework for research excellence also incorporates Activist EDI, most notably in its statement that “Research is excellent when it is inclusive, equitable, diverse, anti-racist, anti-ableist, and anti-colonial in approach and impact” (CIHR 2024k).

Most new initiatives tend to have an EDI component built in. For example, the one-time Canada Research Continuity Emergency Fund (CRCEF) for COVID-19 required program recipients to provide a “strategy for equity, diversity and inclusion decision-making for the use of the funds,” including “how to limit the negative impact of unconscious bias and systemic barriers” and “how to ensure that the decision-making values research that is non-traditional or unconventional, based in Indigenous ways of knowing, outside the mainstream of the discipline, or focused on issues of gender, race or minority status” (Canada 2021a). Newer SSHRC grants described later in this report have also begun to integrate Activist EDI into their application descriptions. The 2023 Advisory Panel on the Federal Research Support System, which recommended a new co-ordinating organization to encourage Tri-Agency collaboration, also recommended that this new organization should “continue to advance the implementation of the Tri-Agency EDI Action Plan” (Canada 2023, 55–56).

Finally, the agencies’ guidelines for the merit review process – which is by far the most important component for determining awards – also reference EDI, albeit mostly in the form of Mild EDI. SSHRC’s *Manual for Merit Review Committee Members* mentions “SSHRC’s commitment to re-examine research excellence through the Tri-agency Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan” and requires committee members to take the “Bias in Peer Review” module as part of SSHRC’s “commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion” (SSHRC 2024d). NSERC’s *Discovery Grants Peer Review Manual 2024–2025* contains 47 references to “equity” or “equitable”; to receive an “Exceptional” ranking for hiring personnel, it encourages applicants to clearly describe “Challenges related to equity, diversity and inclusion specific to the institution and field of research” (NSERC 2024h). The “Bias in Peer Review” module also notes that granting agencies are committed to “enhancing equity, diversity and inclusion in the research funding system,” and that “Future updates will focus on racism and biases faced by members of LGBTQ2+ communities and by people with disabilities, as well as explore how biases intersect” (CIHR Undated).



## Quantitative tracking of SSHRC and NSERC awards

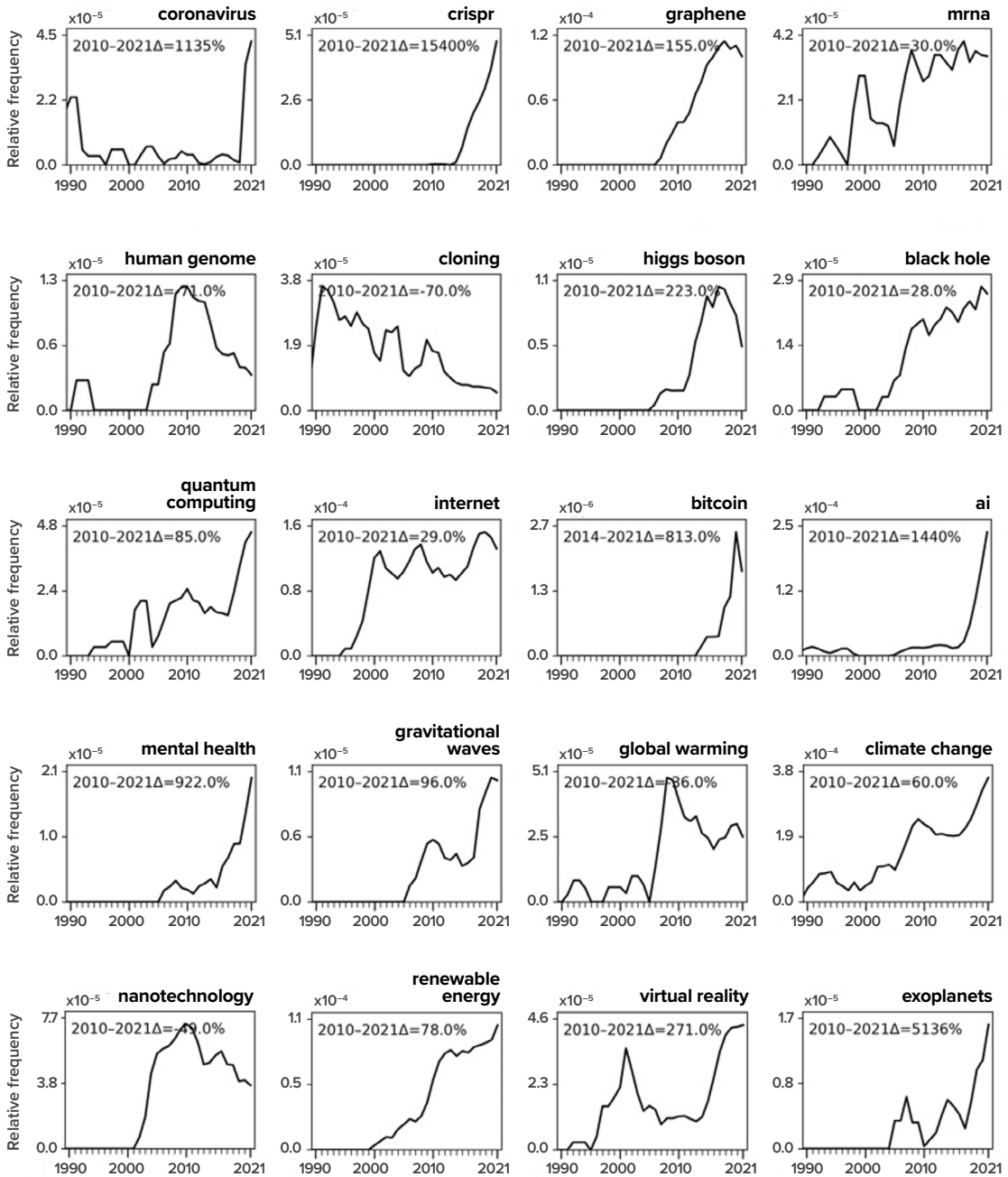
EDI considerations are increasingly manifesting themselves into the three federal granting agencies' guidelines, policies, and processes. But what about the awards themselves? The next two sections draw from SSHRC and NSERC award data to determine the extent to which such EDI considerations have come to the forefront over time.

The first dataset explores longitudinal trends for awards granted by SSHRC (1998–2021) and NSERC (1990–2022). Research scientist Dr. David Rozado conducted the data collection and analysis on behalf of the Macdonald-Laurier Institute using a similar method to Rozado and Wudrick's (2023) longitudinal analysis of Canadian media coverage for the Institute. This method, which had previously been used to explore the extent to which certain language has occurred more prominently over time in news media, has been described extensively in other works by Rozado, where it has accurately captured social trends and historical events (Rozado, Al-Gharbi, and Halberstadt 2021; Rozado 2020; Rozado 2021; Rozado 2022; Rozado and Wudrick 2023, 11).

Specifically, grants were collected from the NSERC (1990–2022) and SSHRC (1998–2021) websites by paginating through the index of grants (NSERC 2022b; SSHRC Undated). Target information, such as project title, application ID, competition year, project leader, institution, award amount, project summary, and other fields, was extracted from source files using customized XPath expressions. The grants were then sorted longitudinally, and yearly relative frequencies were calculated. This was done by dividing the occurrences of a target term (e.g., “diversity”) in all grant titles and keywords (for SSHRC) or grant titles and grant summaries (for NSERC) in a given year by the total number of unigrams in all grant titles and keywords/summaries for that year. This normalization method controls for the varying number of grants awarded each year. For all figures and charts below, the time series are smoothed out with a three-year mean rolling window.

To demonstrate how the model accurately captures the growth of certain topics over time, Figures 5 and 6 show the growth of certain scientific trends rising and dropping at expected times in both the NSERC and SSHRC datasets. For example, the charts in Figure 5 show a rapid growth in awards with the term

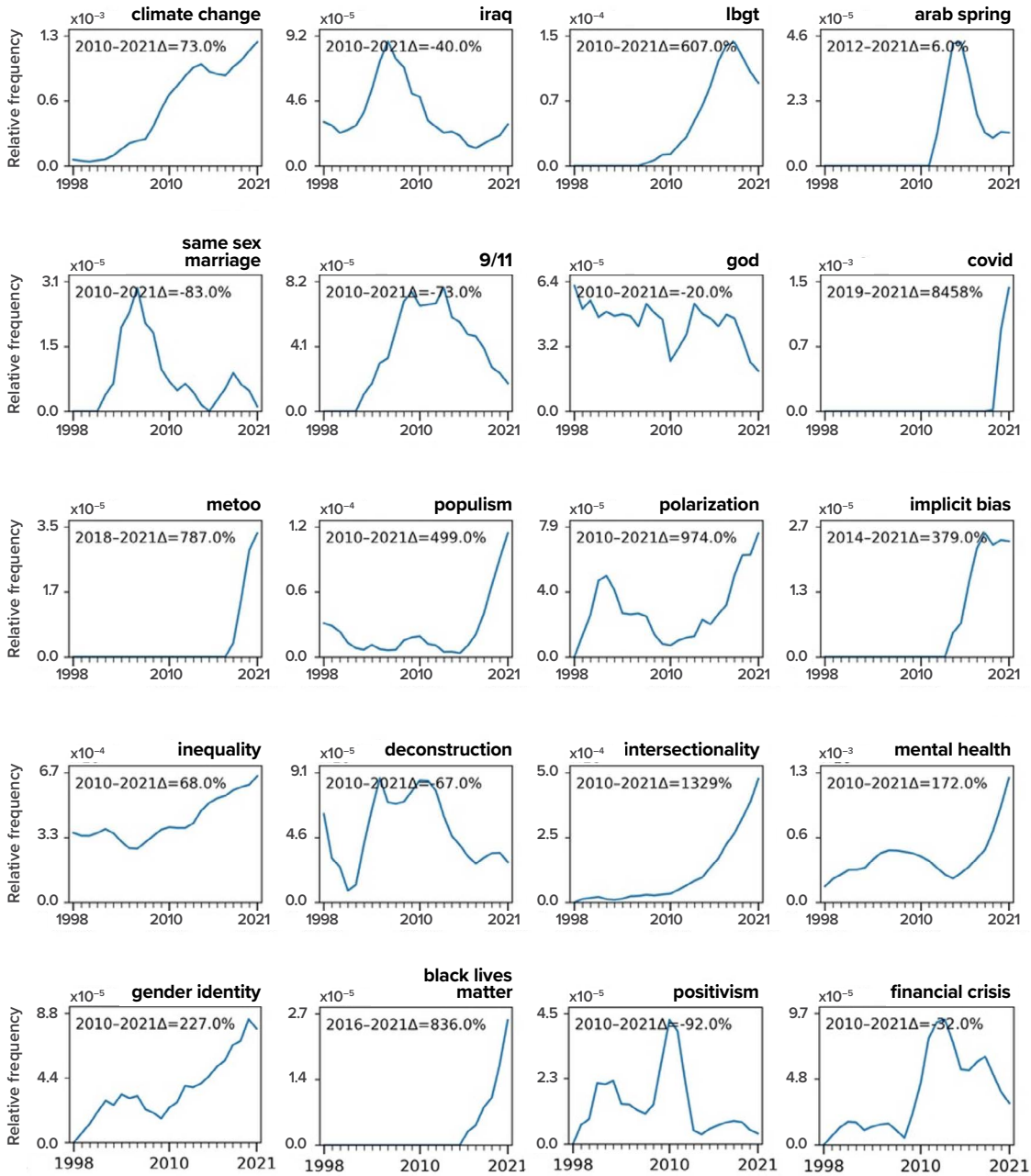
FIGURE 5: Frequency of neutral terms in Canadian NSERC awards (1990–2022)



**Note:** Time series smoothed out with a 3-year mean rolling window

Raw data source: NSERC 2022b; SSHRC Undated

FIGURE 6: Frequency of neutral terms in Canadian SSHRC awards (1998–2021)



Note: Time series smoothed out with a 3-year mean rolling window

Raw data source: NSERC 2022b; SSHRC Undated

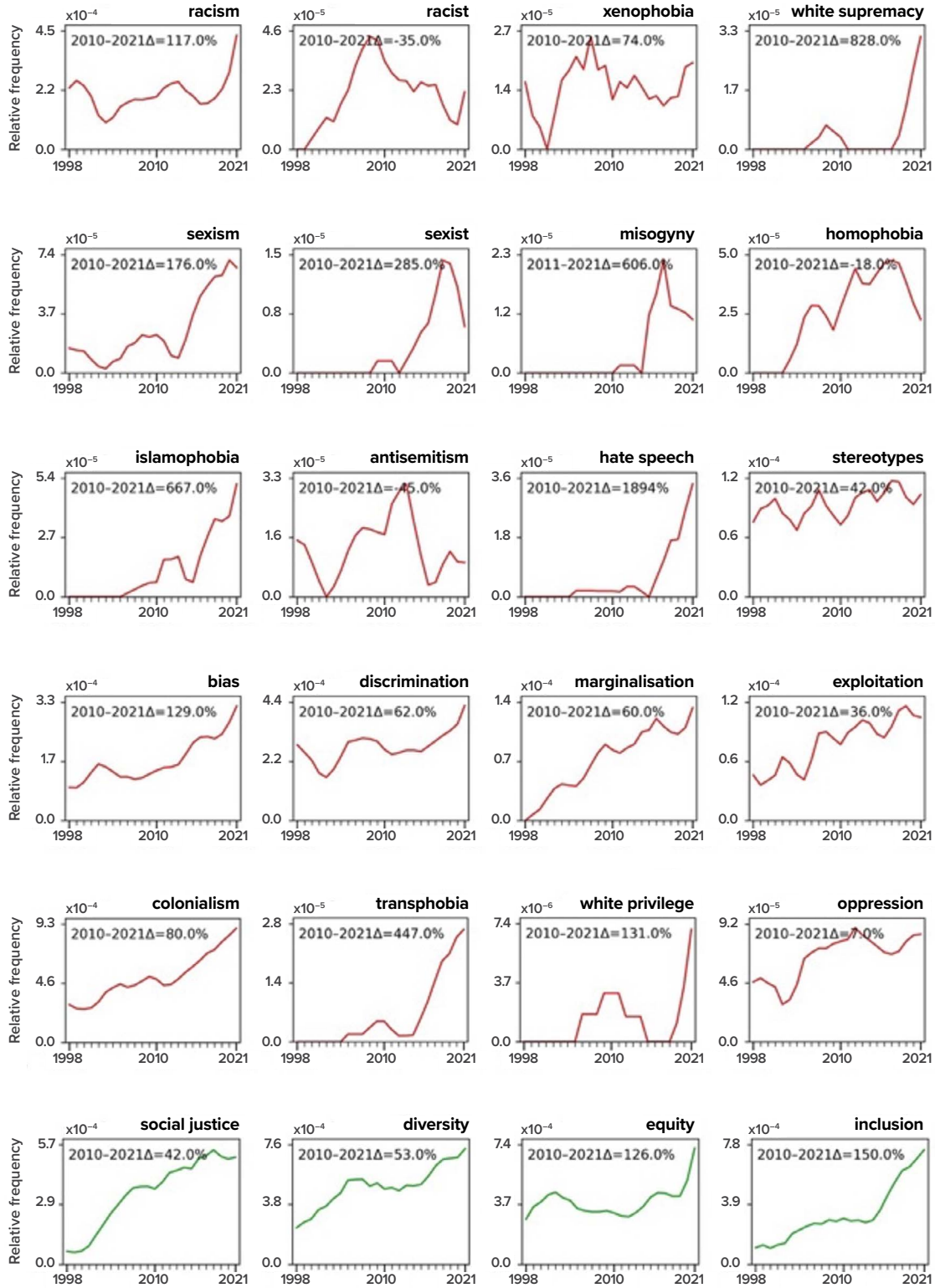
“coronavirus” around the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, a sudden and sustained growth in awards discussing CRISPR technology beginning around 2014 and “ai” around 2017, and a growing focus on the term “climate change” corresponding to a drop in grants for “global warming” around 2010 as the former term replaced the latter in popular discourse. Likewise, the charts in Figure 6 show a growth in terms such as “covid” (around 2020), “arab spring” (2011), and “metoo” (2017) around the expected time periods. As in previous studies using this method, this “temporal sensitivity” gives considerable confidence in the findings (see Rozado and Wudrick 2023, 11; Rozado, Al-Gharbi, and Halberstadt 2021).

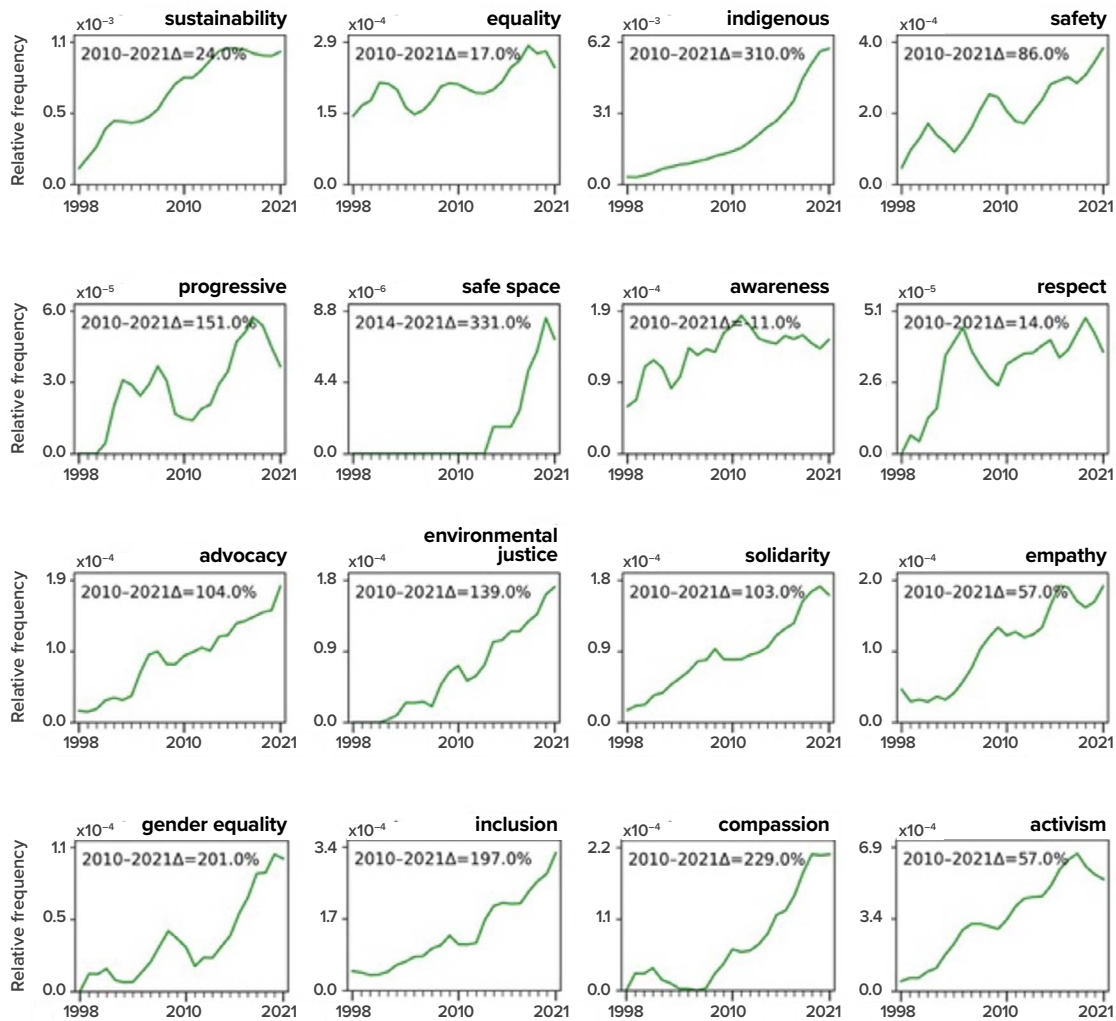
“ *There has been a steady growth in the use of terms like “advocacy” and “activism” during this period.* ”

Figure 7 illustrates the growth of EDI terminology in SSHRC grants awarded between 1998 and 2021. The top half of charts in Figure 7, in red, focus on terms that reflect the “Activist EDI” described above. This shows growth across several of these indicators since 2010, with terms such as transphobia (447 per cent growth), islamophobia (667 per cent), white supremacy (828 per cent), and hate speech (1894 per cent) experiencing the highest relative growth. More traditional and neutral terms to connote prejudice, such as “discrimination” (62 per cent) and “stereotypes” (42 per cent) often saw less sudden and more moderate growth over this period.

Figure 7 also shows that more Mild EDI terminology has grown in SSHRC grants during the same period; those trend lines are in green. Terms such as “gender equality,” “diversity,” “inclusion,” “environmental justice,” and “indigenous” have seen sustained and consistent growth. There has also been a steady growth in both “advocacy” (up 104 per cent since 2010) and “activism” (an increase of 57 per cent since 2010) during this period, a worrying trend for those who believe in a tension between research excellence and activism.

FIGURE 7: EDI terminology in SSHRC awards, 1998–2021





**Note:** Time series smoothed out with a 3-year mean rolling window

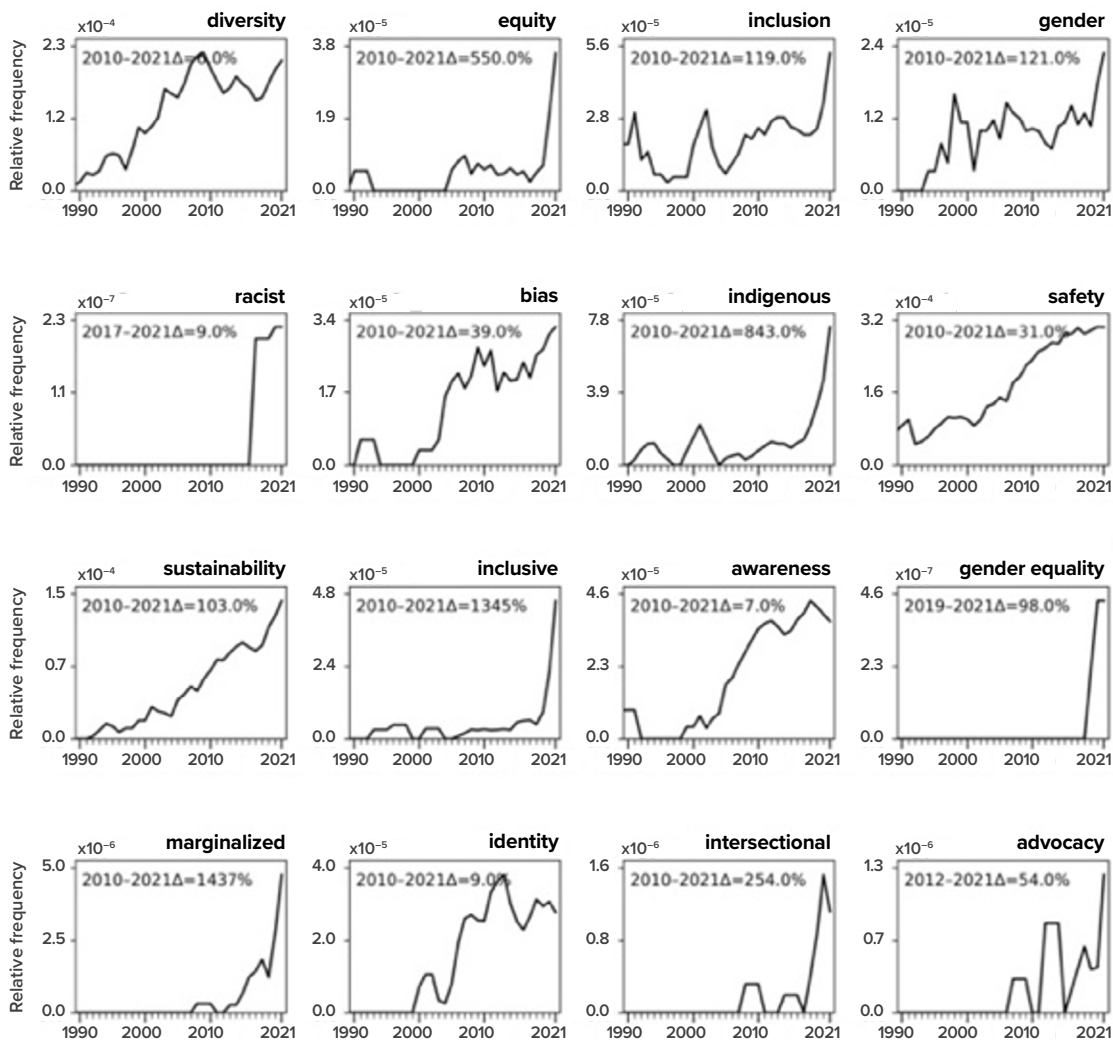
Raw data source: NSERC 2022b; SSHRC Undated

By contrast, the data shows that the penetration of EDI terminology in NSERC grants and awards has been comparatively moderate. While demonstrating much smaller magnitudes on the y-axis than the SSHRC grants above, certain terms in the top half of Figure 8 showed high growth since 2010, particularly “equity,” “diversity,” and “inclusion.” However, not all EDI language has penetrated NSERC grants. Many terms in the bottom half of Figure 8 – such as systemic bias, allyship, white fragility, and critical race theory – remained entirely absent from NSERC awards throughout the duration of the dataset.<sup>3</sup>

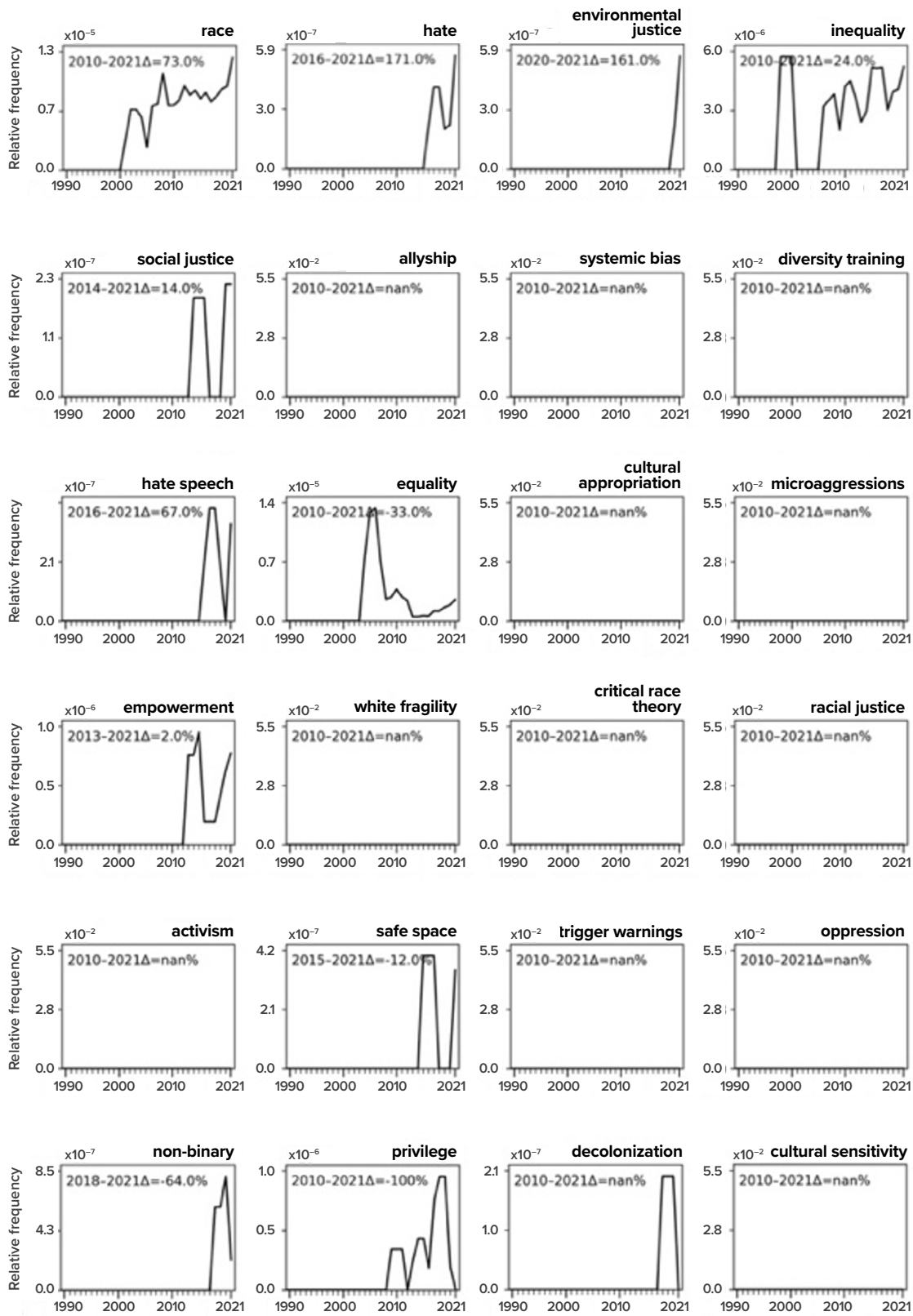


Collectively, these figures show that both Mild and Activist EDI language has penetrated SSHRC and NSERC awards, though to varying degrees. This penetration has happened to a much greater degree in SSHRC grants, where the content of study is more likely to be focused on social and political topics that are more obviously connected to issues animating EDI initiatives. In this sense, the (admittedly more moderate) penetration of EDI into NSERC is less expected, as terms like “equity,” “diversity,” and “inclusion” seem entirely peripheral to the research one would expect to take place in projects funded by the agency.

FIGURE 8: EDI terminology in NSERC grants







**Note:** Time series smoothed out with a 3-year mean rolling window

Raw data source: NSERC 2022b; SSHRC Undated

## Content analysis of SSHRC awards

This section provides a closer look at SSHRC award recipients, adding two additional features to supplement the quantitative data from above: first, it looks at the most recent awards available from SSHRC’s most prestigious grants, showing trends from 2022 to 2024. Second, it explores the prevalence of grant titles containing EDI-related terms as a percentage of grants awarded during this period.

In total, I conducted a content analysis of the titles of 2,622 SSHRC grants whose recipients were announced between 2022 and 2024. These grants comprised awards from the following programs:

- **Insight Grants:** These grants are awarded annually to “support research excellence in the social sciences and humanities” (SSHRC 2024g). They are valued between \$7,000 and \$400,000 over five years. I analyzed a total of 1,008 awards from the 2022 (n=503) and 2023 (n=505) competitions.
- **Insight Development Grants:** These grants are awarded annually to “support research in its initial stages” (SSHRC 2024h). They are valued between \$7,000 and \$75,000 for one to two years. I analyzed a total of 1,139 awards from the 2023 (n=575) and 2024 (n=564) competitions.
- **Partnership Engage Grants:** These grants offer financial support for a partnership with a “single partner organization from the public, private or not-for-profit sector” (SSHRC 2024b). They are valued between \$7,000 and \$25,000 for one year. I analyzed a total of 368 awards from five separate competitions from 2022 (n=100) and 2023 (n=268).
- **Knowledge Synthesis Grants:** These are specialized grants designed to “take an interdisciplinary approach to synthesize research on major societal challenges” and are specifically designed to “assist decision-making in all orders of government and in the private, not for profit and community sectors” (Canada 2021c). These grants are typically awarded on a special topic of interest and are valued at \$30,000 for one year. I analyzed the two most recent Knowledge Synthesis Grants at the time of study: “Shifting

Dynamics of Privilege and Marginalization” (announced in 2023, n=30) and “Evolving Narratives of Cultures and Histories” (announced in 2024, n=31).

- **Race, Gender, and Diversity Initiative (RGDI) Grants:** These one-time grants were created in 2021 to support partnerships “on issues relating to systemic racism and discrimination of underrepresented and disadvantaged groups.” The awards, announced in 2022, are valued at “up to \$450,000” over three years per grant (n=46). Of the 46 grants awarded, 29 were SSHRC-funded and 17 were co-funded by SSHRC and CIHR due to their health-related content (Canada 2022).

This content analysis builds on my preliminary research using the same methodology published in April 2024, which analyzed 680 of the 2,622 grants described here from four competitions (see Snow 2024). In this report, I build on this preliminary research with nearly four times as many total awards from a total of 12 competitions to determine if the trends I identified in 2024 have continued. Grant titles were located from SSHRC’s “Award Recipients” page, which lists recipients from each competition dating back to 2016 (SSHRC 2024l). I did not analyze graduate student and postdoctoral awards.

The selection criteria were designed to include grants presumed to be both more and less likely to include EDI terminology. In principle, EDI considerations should not be prominent with respect to grants from SSHRC’s two major annual competitions – Insight Grants and Insight Development Grants. These awards, which are generally considered SSHRC’s two most prominent individual awards, fall under SSHRC’s “Insight Research” umbrella, the objective of which explicitly includes research excellence: “The goal of SSHRC’s Insight Research program is to build knowledge and understanding about people, societies and the world by supporting research excellence in all subject areas eligible for SSHRC funding” (SSHRC 2023b). SSHRC’s Insight Research page, as well as the description of SSHRC’s Insight and Insight Development grant applications, are devoid of any mention of EDI considerations, although each award page does contain a detailed description of applications related to Indigenous research, including SSHRC’s Guidelines for the Merit Review of Indigenous Research (SSHRC 2023b, 2024g, 2024h). One would not expect EDI to be central in the titles of projects awarded funding under these grants.

I also examined grants from which one might expect more of an activist focus. Partnership Engage grants, for example, are described as “small-scale, stakeholder-driven partnerships... meant to respond to immediate needs and time constraints facing organizations in non-academic sectors.” The application criteria explicitly lists “[c]ross-sector co-creation of knowledge and understanding” and “[p]artnered knowledge mobilization” as types of partnerships (SSHRC 2024b). While the grants application page itself does not include Activist EDI language, the notion of partnering with organizations suggests a greater likelihood for activist-themed research, whatever the ideological orientation of such activism.

The other grants selected are more explicit in their EDI considerations. The application description for the “Shifting Dynamics of Privilege and Marginalization” grant reads very differently than SSHRC’s other applications, explicitly adopting Activist EDI terminology:

- “Our colonial past, racism and slavery continue to shape processes of marginalization and privilege today.”
- “The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified inequalities between the marginalized and the privileged, and has contributed to the escalation of tensions between various groups in civil society and the polarization of political thought.”
- “The forced displacement of tens of millions of people within countries or across borders, exacerbated by migration due to climate change, calls into question hierarchies that exist among different communities of displaced people.”
- “Progressive societies promote values of diversity, equity and inclusion as enriching societies culturally, informing innovation and research, and allowing business development” (SSHRC 2022b).

Likewise, the “Evolving Narratives of Cultures and Histories” application description includes the following content:

- “The impacts of colonialism, racism and slavery continue to inform understandings of, and engagements with, cultures and histories.”
- “In Canada, reconciliation with First Nations, Inuit and Métis requires settlers and newcomers to reconsider dominating historical and cultural narratives and respectfully engage with Indigenous Knowledge systems, cultures and traditions.”

- “Contested cultural and historical narratives can reinforce communal tensions and lead to alienation, denialism and marginalization” (SSHRC 2023c).

Finally, the (much larger in terms of grant award) “Race, Gender and Diversity Initiative” description is the most explicitly EDI-focused. The application overview “encourages an intersectional approach” and cites critical race scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw; it encourages grants from this initiative “to achieve greater justice and equity.” The description asks several questions that presume an Activist EDI perspective, including:

- “Which mechanisms perpetuate White privilege and how can such privilege best be challenged?”
- “What are the current means by which hateful and racist discourses, including by organized hate groups online, are reproduced and gaining momentum in Canada, and how can they best be countered?”
- “How can cisgender and straight masculinity be reinvented for a gender-equitable world?”
- “How has resistance to colonial suppression of nonbinary or matrilineal Indigenous gender systems manifested and persisted, including in oral traditions, and how can it inform action to combat discrimination against transgender, Two-Spirit and non-binary people?”
- “How can we ensure that ableism as well as anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism in Canada’s health-care system do not lead to coercion and maldistribution of assisted dying?”

Collectively, the application descriptions for these three awards were framed very differently from the Insight, Insight Development, and Partnership Engage awards. But does this framing actually correspond to differences in EDI-focused funding? To find out, I first collected and anonymized each of the 2,622 award titles, removing the amount of funding awarded and any indication of the researcher/university, so that I analyzed only the anonymized title. I used Google Translate to translate French-language grant titles.

I coded each grant according to whether the project title listed certain EDI identity markers for five categories: Indigenous Peoples, women/gender, LGBTQ+ (including gender identity/expression), race, and disability (including mental health). These five categories were coded irrespective of the

ideological content of grant title. I also coded each title for a sixth variable: whether the project title was adopting an Activist EDI perspective. While an inherently subjective exercise, I only included projects that clearly adopted language associated with EDI or social justice activism. Examples of such titles include EDI social justice signifiers (such as allyship, intersectional, equity); the use of colonial, decolonial, and settler in a non-neutral way (“Facing Colonial Complicity and Mobilizing Reparations in Canadian Higher Education”); and explicit activism (“Caring for Land, Caring for People: Supporting an Indigenous-led Environmental Stewardship Evaluation Framework”). When there was any ambiguity, only activism in a clear social justice direction (on climate justice, gender identity, and deconstructing society, for example) was coded as “yes.”

Table 1 organizes the five types of grants according to the five identity characteristics, as well as the Activist EDI category. Four broad conclusions can be drawn from the data.

First, there is a major difference between the “traditional” SSHRC grants (Insight, Insight Development, and Partnership) and the three specialized grants in the proportion of grants whose titles demonstrate EDI activism. For traditional grants, Activist EDI titles, ranged from 10 to 15 per

TABLE 1: Proportion of government grants awarded

	EDI-activist	Indigenous	Race	Women/ gender	LGBTQ	Disability
<b>Insight</b>	10%	4%	3%	6%	2%	3%
<b>Insight development</b>	14%	5%	4%	7%	3%	5%
<b>Partnership</b>	15%	6%	3%	6%	4%	6%
<b>Privilege and marginalization</b>	63%	7%	20%	17%	0%	17%
<b>Evolving narratives</b>	42%	23%	13%	10%	0%	0%
<b>Race, gender, and diversity initiative</b>	63%	33%	30%	13%	9%	11%

**Note:** Columns do not add up to 100 per cent, as some grants contain multiple categories, and other grants contain none.

Source: SSHRC 2024I.

cent of all awards; for the three specialized grants, that number ranged from 42 to 63 per cent.

Overall, the language contained in the specialized grants' application instructions is clearly manifesting a particular type of grant application geared towards Activist EDI and away from objective knowledge creation. Some of the more prominent grant titles made this clear:

- “Discrimination, Ableism and Racism Hurt but Inclusion Can Heal: Listening to the Intersectional Lived Experiences of Youth with Disabilities and Co-Creating Solutions” (Race, Gender, and Diversity Initiative).
- “Racism and Systemic Discrimination Against Indigenous People in Quebec: Co-creation of Awareness Tools and (Re)appropriation of Urban Spaces” (Race, Gender, and Diversity Initiative) [translation from French].
- “Tackling Gender-Based Technology-Facilitated Violence and Abuse: Reimagining a Gender-Equitable World” (Race, Gender, and Diversity Initiative).
- “Our Roots in Activism: Finding Agency and Allyship in Histories of Anti-Racist Mobilizing in Canada” (Evolving Narratives of Cultures and Histories).
- “Restorying Gender Through Community, Colonial, and Indigenous Archives” (Evolving Narratives of Cultures and Histories).
- “A Comprehensive Overview of Intersectional Marginalization in Physical Activity Among Equity Deserving Groups in Canada” (Shifting Dynamics of Privilege and Marginalization).
- “Dismantling White Supremacy Through Anti-Racist and Decolonial Pedagogies: Mapping Postsecondary Education’s Capacity for Shifting Dynamics of Privilege and Marginalization” (Shifting Dynamics of Privilege and Marginalization).

Second, there is a clear connection between a focus on EDI activism and a propensity to study race, gender, and Indigeneity. The three specialized grants had a high focus on most identity characteristics. For example, 33 per cent of the grants awarded in the Race, Gender, and Diversity Initiative involved Indigenous peoples and 30 per cent involved race, compared with between 3 and 6 per cent for both categories for the three traditional grants.



Likewise, 23 per cent of the grants awarded in the Evolving Narratives grant involved Indigenous peoples and 13 per cent involved race, compared with between 3 and 6 per cent for both categories for the three traditional grants. Finally, 17 per cent of the grants awarded in the Shifting Dynamics of Privilege and Marginalization grant involved women/gender and a further 17 per cent involved disability, compared with between 3 and 7 per cent for both categories for the three traditional grants. Interestingly, the one identity characteristic for which there was not a significant difference among the grants pertained to the study of the LGBTQ community (which includes gender identity and expression). While 9 per cent of grants in the Race, Gender, and Diversity Initiative were LGBTQ-focused, no titles in the other two specialized grants explored this topic. The traditional grants also had minimal focus on LGBTQ issues, ranging from 2 to 4 per cent of all grants.

Third, while the number of grants awarded with clearly activist titles in the three “traditional” grants was lower than for the specialized grants, grants for which Activist EDI language was present was still alarmingly high among the more traditional grants. Ten per cent of Insight Grants (n=100) and 14 per cent of Insight Development Grants (n=164) had explicitly EDI-Activist language in their titles. Examples include:

- “Lack of Access to Abortion as Structural Violence” (2023 Insight Development Grant).
- “Caste Out in Canada: An Examination of Privilege and Marginalization within Overlapping Systems of Power of White Supremacy, Racism, and Casteism in Canadian Workplaces” (2024 Insight Development Grant).
- “Just Kids: Children and White Supremacy” (2024 Insight Development Grant).
- “Curating Change: Centring Decolonization, Equity, and Social Justice in Exhibition Practice” (2022 Insight Grant).
- “Reclaiming the Outdoors: Structures of Resistance to Historical Marginalization in Outdoor Culture” (2022 Insight Grant).
- “Genderplay, Gender Euphoria and Contexts of Oppressions: Experiences of Queer Youth in Central Canada” (2023 Insight Grant).
- “Facing Colonial Complicity and Mobilizing Reparations in Canadian Higher Education” (2023 Insight Grant).

The goal of Insight research, according to SSHRC (2023b), is “to build knowledge and understanding about people, societies and the world by supporting research excellence in all subject areas eligible for SSHRC funding.” However, the clear direction of a non-negligible portion of SSHRC-funded grants under its Insight program reflect an approach to research which, at the very least, seems to know the answer before it begins. If one is inclined to disagree with this assessment, it is worth asking: can we envision a scenario wherein the grant recipients listed above eventually publish research findings that children did *not* experience white supremacy, that lack of abortion access was *not* structural violence, or that historical marginalization was *not* present in outdoor culture?

It is clear that Activist EDI projects are comprising a sizeable proportion of SSHRC grants. This is particularly true for grants explicitly focused on identity, but also true for 10 to 14 per cent of the grants whose funding envelope is explicitly dedicated to research excellence. Likely there are a variety of factors contributing to this, including general trends in postsecondary research in Canada – a topic discussed in more detail in the Conclusion below. However, there can be little doubt that the EDI-focused priorities in SSHRC’s guidelines and website have done little to dissuade scholars from applying for federal funding for research directed towards Activist EDI ends.

## Analysis and recommendations

The information presented above leads to three broad conclusions on equity, diversity, and inclusion in Canada’s federal granting agencies. First, the granting agencies are infused with EDI considerations. These considerations take many forms: a broad-based Tri-Agency *EDI Action Plan*; multiple agency-specific frameworks on gender, anti-racism, and ableism; grants and awards that give priority (or are exclusively available) to “underrepresented groups”; specialized grants on EDI-related topics replete with EDI-related language; the collection and presentation of data related to identity characteristics and the tracking of awards based on these characteristics; guidelines for applicants on how to include EDI in award applications; a mandatory

diversity research module for postdoctoral and graduate applicants and a mandatory bias module for peer reviewers; and a panoply of terminology that nudges applicants towards the inclusion of EDI considerations into their applications. There is no “hidden EDI agenda” at the federal granting agencies: EDI is front and centre at SSHRC, CIHR, and NSERC.

Second, while EDI considerations are ubiquitous, there is considerable variation in the way in which EDI is presented in the agencies’ guidelines and instructions. NSERC, SSHRC, and CIHR oscillate between what I have identified as three forms of EDI: the Mild EDI of broad assertions to support diversity and inclusion in the research process; the Moderate EDI of affirmative action via “equity targets” and prioritizing applicants based on identity characteristics; and the Activist EDI of rewarding projects that seek to overcome structural oppression against underrepresented groups, often using an intersectional lens.

“ *There is no “hidden EDI agenda” at the federal granting agencies: EDI is front and centre at SSHRC, CIHR, and NSERC.* ”

Third, the data presented here show that Activist EDI considerations have manifested themselves into the actual projects awarded funding, especially by SSHRC. The quantitative longitudinal analysis tracks a substantial growth in awards given not only to grants manifesting more Mild EDI terminology (such as gender equality, compassion, and solidarity) but also considerable growth in the more Activist EDI terms such as colonialism and white supremacy. The terms “activism” and “advocacy” themselves have crept into award titles, suggesting a blurring of lines between research and activism. There has been a less pronounced but still notable growth of terms such as “equity,” “diversity,” and “inclusion” in NSERC awards in recent years, where the logic of their necessity for prestigious science and engineering grants is less obvious. Likewise, the content analysis of major SSHRC awards from

2022 to 2024 shows that, while Activist EDI terminology is (as expected) the norm for specialized grants focused on EDI issues, that language has made its way into a not insignificant proportion of Insight (10 per cent) and Insight Development (14 per cent) awards. Activist EDI is quite clearly taking up an increasing share of government-funded awards.

Given the sheer amount of taxpayer funding provided to these agencies – collectively, they were forecast to spend \$3.95 billion in 2024/25 *before* the federal government increased their funding significantly in Budget 2024 – the extent to which Activist EDI is affecting these granting agencies is of the utmost importance to Canadian policy-makers and the public at large. I make the following recommendations for reform to the granting agencies based on the principles of political neutrality and research excellence.

### **1. Commit the federal granting agencies to political and ideological neutrality.**

On each granting agency website and on award descriptions, applicants should be informed that awards are granted on the basis of political and ideological neutrality. The granting agencies themselves should be clear that research funding is not directed towards an ideological or political agenda – no matter how laudatory – beyond the broad-based application of research excellence to improve society. The enabling legislation for each agency should be amended to specify that the agency shares a commitment to political neutrality.

Of course, it is impossible for many individual research projects to avoid stating certain broad political goals. Grant and scholarship applications should not be disqualified because they express a desire to improve health outcomes or address climate change, for example. But the agency itself can and should make clear that the desire to produce research that improves social well-being is not limited to any ideological perspective. Statements like that on SSHRC's Insight Research page can serve as a good guide: "The Insight Research program aims to support and foster excellence in social sciences and humanities research intended to deepen, widen and increase our collective understanding of individuals and societies, as well as to inform the search for solutions to societal challenges" (SSHRC 2023b). Granting agencies should go no farther than this, and they should avoid any indication that ideologically motivated research will be more successful in terms of receiving awards.

## **2. Remove all references to equity, diversity, and inclusion from the granting agencies' websites and supporting materials.**

In isolation, the Mild EDI that advocates for inclusion and diversity does not compromise research excellence. In practice, however, the language of Mild EDI too often morphs into the Moderate EDI of affirmative action or the Activist EDI of anti-oppression research. SSHRC's (2023a) *Guide to Including Diversity Considerations in Research Design* is a case in point. It states that "Some research projects may... use an anti-oppression or social justice lens, while others may not," but its list of references at the bottom is filled with resources that direct researchers to a particular political agenda, including 11 different sources on intersectionality. Such research may be valuable, but it should not be promoted as a guide for all prospective researchers regardless of research content. The removal of all EDI considerations is important to ensure that the granting agencies are not giving preference to certain forms of ideologically driven research. In this vein, the CIHR should abandon its incorporation of EDI into its framework for defining research excellence.

## **3. Eliminate explicitly EDI-focused grants.**

The Race, Gender, and Diversity Initiative (RGDI) is a prime example of the type of grant designed to promote an ideologically activist agenda. Grants with application instructions that contain statements like "Which mechanisms perpetuate White privilege and how can such privilege best be challenged?" have no place in an ideologically neutral research funding agency. As the data presented in this report shows, these grants encourage applications whose research appears more focused on activism than knowledge creation.

While the RGDI is no longer active, the evidence presented here shows that the infusion of EDI language into SSHRC's Knowledge Synthesis grants has also limited the scope of research and favoured Activist EDI projects. These grant application descriptions include statements such as "Progressive societies promote values of diversity, equity and inclusion as enriching societies culturally, informing innovation and research, and allowing business development" and ask researchers to consider how "laws and policies [are] being used to suppress diversity and protect dominant cultures and historical narratives" (SSHRC 2022b, 2023c). In addition to being ideologically driven, such language betrays a lack of intellectual curiosity, insofar as much of the evidence is already

assumed. These grants are incompatible with objective knowledge creation and should be wound down.

Likewise, it would be a mistake for any future conservative government to simply replace one type of ideologically favourable grants with another. EDI-themed grants should not be replaced with conservative-themed grants. To foster trust in our research institutions, there must be a removal of any sense of political or ideological favouritism.

“ To foster trust in our research institutions, there must be a removal of any sense of political or ideological favouritism.

#### **4. Remove any form of EDI modules and EDI statements from the application process.**

SSHRC has piloted EDI requirements for some of its awards, particularly doctoral and postdoctoral fellowships. SSHRC also requires PhD and postdoctoral award applicants to complete a “Diversity Considerations in Research Design Module.” Any such mandatory requirements are antithetical to research objectivity. As the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) notes, EDI statements effectively compel researchers “to affirm contested views or incorporate them into teaching, research, and service activities” (FIRE 2024). Moreover, as one American academic has written, EDI statements are either “too weak to justify implementing” if they merely reflect the banality of the Mild EDI commitment to diversity or “too strong to cohere with the academic mission” if they tend towards the Activist EDI goal of dismantling oppressive institutions (Shamplung 2022).

Explicit diversity statements have become nearly ubiquitous in Canadian higher education, particularly during the hiring process for new faculty (see Henville 2022). For their part, the federal granting agencies have not yet made mandatory diversity statements a component of major grant applications. Yet with the proliferation of EDI content on their websites, it seems only a matter

of time. The federal government should make it clear that such statements and modules, which encourage researchers to frame their research in a particular ideological direction, should have no place in granting agencies.

#### **5. Remove “equity targets” and preferential awards based on identity characteristics.**

Currently, the federal granting agencies have “equity targets” for achieving improved representation of underrepresented groups, particularly visible minorities, Indigenous peoples, women, and persons with a disability. Canada Research Chairs have similar equity targets, while CIHR announced in 2024 it will be “equalizing” the applicant-award ratio for applicants who self-identify as “a racialized person” or “a person with a disability” (CIHR 2024i).

While section 15(2) of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* permits government to engage in preferential policies towards members of historically disadvantaged groups, it does not mandate such policies. As such, the federal granting agencies’ policies and guidelines for applicants and peer reviewers should specify that grants are awarded based on merit and research excellence as defined in the application guidelines. Increasing the representation of underrepresented communities is a laudable goal, but federal granting agencies should not seek to achieve this goal using preferential awards based on identity (or any other) characteristics.

#### **6. Extend data collection beyond race, gender, Indigeneity, and disability.**

Currently, SSHRC’s “EDI Dashboard” collects and presents self-identification data on the percentage of applicants and award recipients who identify as women, Indigenous, persons with a disability, or visible minorities. NSERC also contains interactive self-identification dashboards for similar identity characteristics.

Above, I have recommended that EDI considerations be removed from the federal granting agencies. However, rather than remove data collection, it should be *transformed* with additional self-identification information and reconceptualized in a way that is unrelated to EDI. Good social scientists should want more data, not less. There is evidence suggesting that conservatives, for example, are widely underrepresented in Canadian academia, especially in the social sciences and humanities (Dummitt and Patterson 2022). Given that the granting agencies already collect applicant



information, they should collect information on other aspects beyond EDI-focused identity characteristics, such as religiosity, age, country of origin, province of origin, and even political orientation.

Regardless of which data are collected, such self-identification information should never be shared with committee members or peer reviewers who are responsible for awarding grants. This can ensure that there is no bias in the awards process. To ensure the data are not used to reintroduce equity targets in an ideological direction, applicants should be told in no uncertain terms that their answers to the self-identification questionnaire will not increase their likelihood of receiving an award. Such data collection, if anonymized during the merit review stage and only made available after awards are allocated, could help us better understand the makeup of the Canadian research community as well as the extent to which certain groups – beyond the few for whom data is currently available – are underrepresented in certain fields.

## **7. Do not “ban” EDI-driven research.**

There is a difference between promoting and permitting certain forms of research. Currently, the federal granting agencies are engaged in active *promotion* of EDI-driven research, which should be ended immediately. But such research should nevertheless be *permitted*. We should continue to invite methodological and ideological pluralism and encourage activist-driven researchers to apply for research funding on the basis of objectively meritorious criteria, including commitments to research excellence and knowledge production. Many American states have sought to “ban” critical race theory from K–12 schools, with some bans affecting institutions of higher education (Alexander 2023). Such bans are utterly incompatible with academic freedom and research excellence. Activist-driven research, including EDI-focused research, should be permitted to continue and to contribute to the marketplace of ideas.

Applicants applying for funding for such research should be encouraged to explain why their research is deserving of scarce taxpayer resources, just as all other researchers do. If researchers coming from an Activist EDI perspective can successfully make the case that they will be contributing to objective knowledge creation and engaging in research excellence, then there is no reason that such research topics – or any research topic – should be inherently ineligible for research funding.

## Conclusion

This report has shown how EDI considerations have become infused into the work of Canada's three federal granting agencies whose total annual expenditures are \$3.95 billion and rising. However, I have also shown that there is significant scope for reform to remove EDI from the agencies' remit. The agencies remain, in principle and via statutory mandate, committed to research excellence. The granting agencies remain indispensable in terms of funding the most important research in Canada, not to mention providing crucial funding for graduate students and postdoctoral researchers. The data show that the proportion of major grants awarded to projects using Activist EDI language, while higher than it should be, remains small in relative terms. The recommendations above, which collectively seek to entrench the principles of ideological and political neutrality at the agencies by removing EDI, can ensure that the commitment to research excellence returns to the fore of the agencies themselves.

To better understand how EDI is conceptualized by Canada's granting agencies, this report distinguished between Mild, Moderate, and Activist EDI. However, my analysis also shows that these boundaries can become unclear in practice, with the granting agencies' EDI guidelines shifting from vague considerations of inclusiveness (Mild) to affirmative action mandates (Moderate) to calls to reinvent cisgender and straight masculinity (Activist), all using the same language of "equity, diversity, and inclusion." Such conceptual blurred lines permit politicization over what should be the politically neutral terrain of government-funded research.

The data presented in this report can also contribute to the debate over whether federal granting agencies are upstream or downstream of the trend towards Activist EDI research. Are the granting agencies' priorities pushing researchers towards EDI-driven research? Or are researchers already inclined towards EDI activism, with the granting agencies' awards merely reflecting academic trends, or even performing a gatekeeping function that minimizes the number awards given to activist research?

The data here do not provide a definitive answer to these questions. Certainly, there is evidence that EDI activist research has been growing in the social sciences and humanities in recent decades, and that such trends would likely have occurred irrespective of granting agencies' priorities (see

Kaufmann 2024a; Mounk 2023). However, the data also show that when the government does promote certain types of politicized research through the granting agencies, the projects awarded under those programs contain far more Activist EDI content. It is no coincidence that the Knowledge Synthesis Grants examined above – which derived directly from the government of Canada’s prioritized “Future Challenge Areas” – funded the most activist research. Federal granting agencies ultimately get their priorities from the federal government. If the government prioritizes objective knowledge creation and ideologically neutral research, that type of research will be funded. If the federal government prioritizes Activist EDI awards, then Activist EDI projects will receive more funding.

Unfortunately, there are no signs that the current federal Liberal government, under which so much of the EDI push began, is interested in rolling back its scope. The federal granting agencies are not alone among federal institutions whose core mandate has become infused with EDI considerations; there is evidence that EDI has crept into the Canadian Space Agency and Statistics Canada (Cross 2024; Sarkonak 2024b). Indeed, the federal government seemed to be doubling down on its EDI initiatives in 2024, including by announcing its \$110 million Anti-Racism Strategy and a subsequent Black Justice Strategy (Barghiel 2024; Canada 2024a, 2024b).

Yet there is no inherent reason why this government, or any future government, needs to maintain the ubiquitous focus on EDI. Indeed, there is a sign of some pushback within academia, in Canada and elsewhere. In May 2024, 40 scholars submitted a brief to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Science and Research recommending the abolition of EDI from the three federal granting agencies. In particular, they cited the significant costs of EDI, its administrative burden on small institutions, and weak evidence for EDI’s benefits. They also noted that many faculty are “scared even to question Tri-Council policies relating to equity, diversity, and inclusion” (Horsman et al. 2024). Likewise, in late 2024 the House of Commons Standing Committee on Science and Research began a study into the criteria for research excellence at the federal granting agencies. During its initial hearings, several scholars made presentations criticizing the way EDI has crept into the agencies’ remit (Standing Committee on Science and Research 2024b).

In addition to the sense that EDI initiatives constitute “a waste of billions of dollars and millions of hours spent by universities, businesses,

and philanthropy,” there is a growing body of scholarship showing how EDI initiatives can do “active harm” by increasing racial resentment by focusing on “white privilege” and “amplifying perceptions of prejudicial hostility where none was present” (Kleinfeld 2024; Jagdeep et al. 2024, 2; see also Branscombe, Schmitt, and Schiffhauer 2007; Dobbin and Kalev 2016). American institutions such as MIT and Harvard’s Faculty of Arts and Science have also stopped asking faculty for diversity statements, which suggests the EDI tide may be waning (Blinder and Schuessler 2024; Quinn 2024).

Moreover, Canadians themselves do not seem inclined towards EDI – indeed, the evidence points in the other direction. In his 2024 Macdonald-Laurier Institute report, Eric Kaufmann presented survey evidence that the Canadian public tends to lean against the “woke” position by a 2 to 1 margin (Kaufmann 2024a, 72). Polling from November 2024 showed that Canadian respondents were more than twice as likely to oppose (57 per cent) as support (28 per cent) the statement that “When companies hire people, it is important for employers to take their cultural background (e.g., racial status / visible minority) into account.” Opposition to such “equity hiring” was nearly as strong among non-white respondents, with 49 per cent opposed and only 34 per cent in favour (Jedwab 2024).

There is thus little evidence that Canadians support either Activist EDI or even the Moderate EDI of affirmative action. There is no obvious constituency for the type of EDI policies that have infused themselves into Canada’s federal granting agencies, apart from the faculty and graduate students whose research the funding supports. The onus should be on EDI proponents to justify why taxpayer dollars ought to fund a narrowly activist research agenda when it could be better put to other projects that seek to improve knowledge in a way that does not presuppose the answer to the questions it seeks to answer.

EDI is taking up an increasing share of the focus of federal granting agencies. The net effect has been to harm the perception of political independence and unbiased research that is crucial to any research funding agency. Yet that harm is not irreparable. To avoid further damage, the government should remove EDI considerations from the granting agencies and ensure they are committed to ideological and political neutrality. [MLI](#)

## About the author



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## Endnotes

- 1 In the United States and elsewhere, the acronym DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) is more commonly used. However, as Canadian federal government institutions use EDI, that is the term this report uses throughout.
- 2 This funding was allocated through the Public Health Events of National Concern Payments Act, enacted as part of the COVID-19 Emergency Response Act. This legislation authorized two funds: payments for students and youth (of which approximately \$343 million of which was spent, with \$114 million spent by NSERC, \$197 million by CIHR, and \$32 million by SSHRC); and the Canada Research Continuity Emergency Fund (CRCEF), which was available to researchers from all three agencies but was distributed by SSHRC (NSERC 2021, 22; CIHR 2021, 18; SSHRC 2021a, 21). The Emergency Fund spent \$325 million through SSHRC, with the additional \$125 million paid “from a voted authority under a listed grant with the same name as the program” in January 2021 and therefore not included in SSHRC’s budget (Canada 2021a, 2021b).
- 3 As a point of comparison, a follow-up search in September 2024 for the term “allyship” found zero NSERC award results compared with 24 SSHRC award results (consisting of 16 unique awards) containing that term. All of those 24 SSHRC awards were granted between 2015 and 2023.

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