



**Office of the Vice Provost for Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Anti-Racism**

## **Dialogue Sessions Report**

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**The Lived Experiences of Racialized and International Students  
Across Memorial University Campuses.**

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## **Land acknowledgment**

We acknowledge that the lands on which Memorial University's campuses are situated are in the traditional territories of diverse Indigenous groups, and we acknowledge with respect the diverse histories and cultures of the Beothuk, Mi'kmaq, Innu, and Inuit of this province.

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## **Labour acknowledgment**

We acknowledge the labour theft extracted from people of African descent, used to build European wealth and economies globally, and in the Canadian nation-state, including Newfoundland and Labrador's shipbuilding and cod fishery industries through the violence of trans-Atlantic enslavement.

# Introduction

This report presents the proceedings of two dialogue sessions conducted by the Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Anti-Racism (EDI-AR) office at Memorial University in November 2023. These dialogue sessions are part of an ongoing consultative process aimed at providing space for interested persons in the university, including students, student, staff and faculty, to identify strategies, policies, and changes that should be implemented to make Memorial University a welcoming and discrimination-free learning, teaching and working environment. The insights gathered from these dialogue sessions provide important baseline information to guide the EDI-AR portfolio's interested individuals' engagement initiatives. They also contribute to shaping university-wide efforts to ensure that Memorial achieves its equity, diversity, inclusion, and anti-racism goals outlined in its various frameworks and plans.

The November 2023 dialogue sessions were designed to learn about the lived and living experiences of racialized and international students at all university campuses. The sessions were guided by the following four questions:

1. What is it that Memorial offers that makes the university an academic institution of choice for international students?
2. What is Memorial University currently doing well to enhance the experiences of racialized and international students?
3. At the current time, what are some areas for improvement to ensure better experiences for racialized and international students on campus?
4. Looking forward to the future, what should/could the experiences of racialized and international students at Memorial University look like?

## *How the dialogue sessions were conducted*

The two dialogue sessions took a hybrid approach to accommodate a broad spectrum of students. Students from all campuses were encouraged to attend. The students had the flexibility to attend the sessions in person (at St John's campus and Marine Institute),

virtually through Teams, or to make email submissions responding to the four questions above. Invitations to the dialogue sessions were disseminated in advance through Memorial University's websites, internal mailing lists, and the EDI-AR portfolio's social media platforms. Posters were also printed and distributed to students at the Marine Institute and St John's campus and sent electronically to Grenfell Campus.

In total, 23 international students representing Africa, the Caribbean, and South Asia, participated in the two dialogue sessions. Participants were primarily undergraduate students and presented as male and female. Given the small sample size, only broad regions are identified to ensure participants' anonymity. The attendance levels were lower than expected as some students declined to participate due to conflicting schedules with classes and other demands. Nonetheless, despite the low attendance, the enthusiasm of the students and their openness to discuss personal issues lighted the dialogue sessions and allowed for a thorough exploration of the four guiding questions. Two members of the EDI-AR team were tasked to capture the proceedings of the dialogue sessions as note-takers. While the deliberations were recorded verbatim, findings and comments in this report are not linked to any individual student. Rather, reference is made to students' affiliation (i.e., their campus, subject major, year of study, etc.) in some cases.

## **What we heard from the students**

The following sections present feedback about the lived and living experiences of racialized and international students at Memorial University, as articulated by participants in two dialogue sessions. To provide a comprehensive overview of these experiences, the feedback is categorized into four themes drawn from the guiding questions. These are: factors that make Memorial an academic institution of choice for international students; current initiatives being undertaken at Memorial to enhance the experience of international and racialized students; areas that need to be improved; and the long-term vision that participants have for Memorial to make it harassment and discrimination-free teaching, learning and work environment.

*What makes Memorial University an academic institution of choice for international and racialized students?*

The students emphasized that Canadian institutions of higher learning are generally superior to those in their home countries and other regions worldwide regarding access to technology and resources. As a result, they specifically sought out universities in Canada to pursue their education. Additionally, some students, particularly those from the Caribbean, mentioned that they first learned about Memorial University through the student recruitment events organized by the university.

Regarding their decision to choose Memorial over other North American universities, the students highlighted affordability as the primary factor, particularly in comparison to institutions in the United States and other parts of Canada.

However, they also expressed concerns about the university's recent announcement regarding a significant increase in tuition fees.

*Current initiatives being undertaken at Memorial to enhance the experience of international and racialized students*

***Hosting events for international students:***

The students praised the numerous campus events, particularly those coordinated by the internationalization office. These events not only help to facilitate international students' adaptation to university life in Newfoundland and Labrador but also foster a sense of recognition and feelings of inclusion among some students. They noted feeling a sense of security within the university community, particularly when in the presence of or surrounded by other international students.

***Multicultural Calendar:***

The university maintains a multicultural calendar that tracks holidays, spiritual and religious observation and events that are celebrated and observed in some students' home countries. The students perceive this initiative as significant because it reflects the university's recognition of the diverse and rich student groups that attend school, live, and work on its campuses.

***Support for international students:***

Some international students shared that they get messages of encouragement and solidarity from members of the university communities in official communications (e.g., The Gazette) and public places such as social media when crises such as war, and environmental disasters happen in their respective countries. Participants note that these messages give comfort, and may be signs that the university recognizes and cares for the concerns and struggles of international students registered at Memorial.

***Accommodating classroom environments:***

The majority of them expressed that they do not encounter discrimination in the classroom. They noted that professors are often accommodating to their needs. For example, they sometimes acknowledge students' needs for additional support by taking the time to explain concepts and reminding students of the availability of office hours for additional support. Participants also shared that both international and local students interact well in class environment, and at times collaborate on group assignments and other class projects.

***Areas that need to be improved***

The students identified the following as the primary areas requiring improvement.

### ***Food on campus:***

Students residing on campus and enrolled in the mandatory university meal plans have expressed dissatisfaction with the dining hall offerings, citing limited variety and expensive food. They struggle to find familiar foods from their home countries and are occasionally compelled to abandon their meal plans in favor of purchasing food from off-campus restaurants and grocery stores. Participants noted that food carries significant cultural importance for them, especially during high holidays and cultural observances. However, access to these foods diminishes while living or being on campus. For instance, one student indicated that it is a tradition in the Caribbean for families to have special meals on Sundays. However, nothing similar to these culturally significant Sunday meals is among the available food options in the Memorial dining hall.

*"In the Caribbean, we enjoy our finest meals on Sundays, but unfortunately, the dining hall at MUN doesn't offer any quality food."*

Despite the convenience of on-campus living and easy access to prepared foods, some international students contemplate living off-campus due to the inaccessible and unfamiliar food choices in the dining room plan.

### ***Tuition fees and limited scholarship opportunities:***

Participants expressed concerns about tuition fees, which for many have significantly increased over the last few years. Participants noted that they [international students] are paying much higher tuition fees than Canadian-born and local students, yet they do not have access to the majority of scholarships, which are either program-specific and/or exclusive to only Canadian citizens and permanent residents.

Furthermore, participants expressed frustration with the part-time work policy at Memorial University that restricts graduate students from working more than 24 hours a week. Participants say they are continually unclear why this is the case even though the Canadian government has temporarily lifted restrictions on international students' on-

campus working hours. Memorial's decision to keep the old 24-hour limit was viewed as unjust, especially in light of the escalating cost of living in Canada and rising tuition fees. The students emphasized that following the new rules about working hours would allow them to work additional hours which could potentially alleviate some of the financial difficulties and burdens they experience.

***Lack of support in finding work terms:***

A participant who is enrolled in a popular and highly sought-after program, indicated that International students are required to complete work terms to graduate from their programs. According to one student, "the university does not assist international students in securing work terms," and shared that many such students have feelings of neglect and lack of care.

Participants shared that local regulations restrict non-permanent Canadian residents and citizens from sailing ships in Canada and this has a significant negative impact on the education and opportunities of international student pursuing marine engineering. Additionally, certain certifications are necessary for employment in the marine industry, creating barriers for students seeking work placements in this field. These requirements are not communicated to students before their enrollment at Memorial University. Furthermore, the university does not have experienced staff to assist international students with work-term placements. This later point was confirmed by a student who said:

"We have to discover the requirements for work-term placements on our own. The placement officers don't know the process of finding work terms. They tell us that they are also learning from the students' experiences."

*"The university does not help international students to find work terms – we are on our own.*

Consequently, students across the university who are required to complete work terms and who are unable to secure these work terms cannot graduate on time and are

compelled to pay additional tuition fees. The students suggested that Memorial should appoint a placement officer to specifically assist international students with work-term placements.

#### ***Finding accommodation in St John's:***

Another major concern the students noted was securing accommodation in the city of St. John's and relatively close to the university to give them easy access to walking to school. One student recounted a personal struggle in finding accommodation while preparing to

*“Once school closes, university residence closes. Where do you expect international students to go when there is already a housing crisis?”*

enroll for the first semester at Memorial. After finding a room online and paying a deposit to secure the room the student was informed by the landlord that the room was no longer available as it had been leased to another tenant. The student's money was not returned and there was nothing to be done due to fear of being engrossed with the authorities. The students also shared stories about many of their colleagues who had been affected by housing scams within the city.

International students living on campus highlighted the difficulties they encounter when the university closes its residences at the end of each semester and during the extended break between December and January when almost everything is shut down. Unlike local or other Canadian students, who may have family in the province or the ability to travel to their homes in other provinces, international students struggle to find short-term accommodation and food during this extended university-wide holiday. The university does not offer any alternative housing solutions and matching students with families for one day (Christmas day) cannot alleviate the stress for international students who need the on-campus resources.

According to the students, Memorial should take responsibility for ensuring that students have suitable housing, as this lack of consideration and neglect reflects poorly on the university's image.

### ***Harassment at University Campuses:***

Participants raised significant concerns about local students displaying discrimination and ignorance towards international students by making fun of and uttering derogatory comments about the way they speak (their accents). Students pointed out that fostering more interactions through shared events could help alleviate such issues.

### *Long-term vision for Memorial*

The students expressed strong hopes for a comprehensive transformation of the university environment, urging for increased inclusivity and approachability across all levels. They particularly emphasize the need for enhanced representation of racialized and international students in various facets of university life, including active participation in student unions such as the Memorial University Students' Union (MUNSU).

The students also want to see enhanced support systems to enable international and racialized students to feel proud of who they are and their backgrounds while on campus. Specifically, they mentioned that the university should hire and train specialized staff to assist international students in navigating the process of obtaining the required documentation for their work terms and other necessities to ensure successful adaptation at Memorial University and in the province.

Furthermore, the students expressed a strong desire to connect with international alumni who have successfully navigated similar challenges. They believe that such alumni engagement initiatives would offer valuable inspiration and guidance to them as current international students.

Lastly, the students emphasized the importance of continuous opportunities for dialogue and open communication where they can openly express their concerns, exchange experiences, and actively participate in shaping a more welcoming, inclusive, and supportive university atmosphere. They believed that this is essential for nurturing a

sense of community, mutual understanding, and collaboration among students with different lived and living experiences and backgrounds.

## Conclusion

The insights gathered from the dialogue sessions have illuminated the challenges encountered by racialized and international students, as well as their aspirations to cultivate a more inclusive and harassment-free learning and teaching environment at Memorial University. These findings serve as a crucial foundation for the EDI-AR portfolio to spearhead initiatives tailored to address the unique needs of international and racialized students. Moreover, they pave the way for continued engagement with various interested parties across the university including staff, faculty, and senior administrators to foster a university environment that genuinely reflects its commitment to equity, diversity, inclusion, and anti-racism.

The dialogues are limited by the small sample size and the lack of representation from some campuses. While the dialogues were meant to capture racialized and international students, perspectives, experiences, visions, and needs, the complexities of the racialized experience did not materialize in the discussions. Rather, the focus was on a primary aspect of life and living experience, that being international students. There also needs to be caution around the use of the term “local students” as this was not defined. However, students appeared to refer to white presenting students as “local”. Not all white presenting students are Newfoundland and Labradorian by birth so this needs to be taken into consideration. In spite of these limitations, this report serves as an added building block that complements the findings of the Equity-Diversity, Inclusion, and Anti-Racism Strategic Planning Report regarding international students.