

Our Collective Wellbeing:

Towards a Local Hiring Strategy at York University

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Introduction

York University and Jane-Finch community leaders and partners have been coming together for over four years to discuss and better understand opportunities for local inclusive hiring at the university, with the goal of strengthening the economy at the neighbourhood level.

As an anchor institution, York University is rooted in place and has significant economic power. By developing a local hiring strategy and directly employing residents in ongoing, living-waged jobs, York can begin to create positive changes and contribute to the long-term wellbeing of the communities of which it is part. Similarly, local communities can leverage the university's existing activities and resources to address deep inequities, drive more inclusive economic development, and build economic security. In the process, both institution and community will benefit from these investments in better hiring systems and a stronger, healthier workforce.

Our Collective Wellbeing: Towards a Local Hiring Strategy at York University is a report back to our larger communities on recent surveys and focus groups that were completed with local residents employed at York's Keele Campus. It is our hope that the findings and recommended actions outlined in this report will begin to flush out a road map for moving forward on the Anchor YorkU goals of increasing local inclusive hiring as a key employment strategy at all York's campuses.

Background

Anchor YorkU: An Anchor Institution and Community Benefits Framework outlines York's aspirations as an Anchor Institution (2017) to have impacts in the key areas of social procurement, infrastructure, employment, and community engagement. The first working group identified at that time was the social procurement working group. They have since steered a social procurement policy that was approved by the university's Board of Governors in 2019 and are implementing several pilot projects that integrate social procurement objectives in York's business procedures. York is now leading the way for many post-secondary institutions in the area of social procurement.

In 2019, an employment working group was formed, and a number of goals were set, including strengthening local hiring. A sub-group made up of York University and the Black Creek Fair Economies project at the Jane/Finch Centre undertook a research project, supported

financially by United Way Greater Toronto, to better understand the trajectory and experience of employees who currently live or have lived in the local communities of Jane-Finch/Black Creek. This research, along with feedback from community members, aimed to inform steps forward.

Our Collective Wellbeing reflects on the survey feedback and focus group discussions held with employees and community members and proposes recommendations to support the increase of employment and career opportunities at York University for local residents.

Benefits of Local Hiring

Through the discussions, it became clear that there are many benefits to a focus on local hiring as one of the employment strategies at YorkU. Many participants mentioned that shorter commute times were healthier and allowed time to develop other interests and invest in family leading to a more balanced life. Due to the uncertain nature of commuting in the GTA, local employees felt they were a timely and reliable workforce. The recent pandemic highlighted that emergencies happen, and participants felt that they were more agile and flexible in terms of emergency preparedness. The collective carbon footprint from commuting would also be reduced.

As one of the largest employers in the area, the economic spinoff related to institutional spending is significant. (*YorkU Social and Economic Impact Report, 2020*). It is recognized that people tend to spend money in their own neighbourhoods. Well-paying jobs with benefits strengthen individual households and also contribute to the stability of the larger community.

“What if York was for Jane and Finch like GM is to Oshawa - a sought out employer, a part of the community, an integrated institution where our collective wellbeing was mutually dependent.” Jane-Finch Resident

There are also social benefits to increasing York’s presence in the local community as a viable employer. Employees can be bridge-builders within their communities, reinforcing that York is a real and positive part of the community. Children of employees can attend York, making a postsecondary education even more financially attainable through the tuition waiver, realistic living at home options and shorter commutes to school. The local communities surrounding York are made up of predominantly racialized residents (*Humber River-Black Creek City of Toronto Ward Profile, 2018*) and are a strong asset to the University. For example, a local hiring strategy could contribute to student success as students are more likely to access services and feel welcomed at the university if they see themselves reflected in the staff.

“I have heard several non-white students say that they would visit more of this student service or this student service if the staff was diverse or if they

see themselves reflected in the staff. York needs to do a better job with making more of their services staff members diverse!”

The Research Process

A survey was created and circulated with all current York employees from all employee groups. Employees who currently live in the local communities (postal code areas M3N, M3M, M3L, M3J) or who had lived there in the past were invited to complete the survey. Within the first 24 hours, over 75 people had responded to the surveys, and a total of 160 surveys were submitted, indicating a high level of employee interest in the topic. The survey launched on October 7th and closed on October 25, 2020. In addition to the surveys, four focus groups were held over Zoom in November with 12 employees who had indicated interest in a more in-depth discussion. The responses were reviewed and collated into themes which make up the remainder of this report.

It should also be noted that the Jane/Finch Centre, through their Black Creek Fair Economies project and other initiatives, has had numerous conversations with community residents regarding community economic development over recent years. Employment at York often came up in those discussions.

Thematic Summary of Surveys and Focus Groups

Who Are Local Employees - Demographics/Employment Status

For purposes of this report, local employees are residents of the Jane-Finch/Black Creek area of northwest Toronto, which encompasses postal codes M3N, M3M, M3L, M3J. This area includes some of the most diverse neighbourhoods in the City of Toronto. Jane-Finch/Black Creek is also home to a high percentage of low-income workers, newcomers, youth, and people living in social housing. Historic disinvestment, labour market discrimination, and other systemic barriers in these communities have led to few economic opportunities and a high unemployment rate. Many residents who are employed are travelling long distances to get to their workplaces, underemployed for their education or experiences, or working in unsafe, precarious jobs ([Permanently Temporary: Labour, Precarity and Resistance in Jane Finch, 2019](#)).

Local residents make up approximately 12% of York University employees. If that number is broken down, 1% of employees at York are from the Jane-Finch area which is closest to York. While many of the respondents were from the M3J area (Keele/Sheppard), a significant number of respondents were from the M3N postal area of Jane-Finch. While they are the smallest number of all local employees, they were highly engaged in the survey process.

Respondents were of prime career age and were mostly women and racialized, predominantly Black and South Asian. Many were in full-time / permanent roles. The majority of respondents worked in non- academic roles, though a quarter of respondents were academics. Central Administration and the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Professional Studies were the largest employing units. Respondents made a long-term commitment to their jobs with over 52% having been at York for five years or more (23% percent of those have been at York 20+years).

Equity Identified groups within the 12% are represented as follows:

| Postal Codes | Women | Indigenous Peoples | Racialized Persons | Persons with Disabilities |
|--------------|-------|--------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|
| M3J | 9.6 % | 0.2% | 7.5% | 2.1% |
| M3L | 19.6% | 0.0% | 13.7% | 0.0% |
| M3M | 22.9% | 0.0% | 14.6% | 2.1% |
| M3N | 22.7% | 0.9% | 15.5% | 1.8% |

Internal employment equity self-identification survey, November 2019.

The Hiring Process

Anecdotally, the perception within the local community of employment at York is that it is difficult to get into. Some of these reasons include lack of clarity and transparency about the hiring process, not hearing back or long wait times to hear back if at all, and the complex employment environment, including York University Temporary Agency (YUTA) and other roles covered in Collective Agreements. Also noteworthy was the sentiment that the hiring processes are biased and based on who you know. Positions sometimes are not posted. The majority of respondents felt that they possessed the required qualifications for the jobs they applied to.

Residents’ general employment experience is that local postal codes are stigmatizing, especially for Black youth, in their employment search (*Tired of the Hustle: Youth Voices on Unemployment, 2016*). This research highlighted that the hiring process is not always felt to be fair and transparent, and that there are many intersectionality’s at play when thinking about local hiring within the standard hiring process. Some of the themes regarding the hiring process in this research included:

- Over 30% of respondents first heard about opportunities on York’s career page and over 36% through word of mouth;
- Perceptions that favouritism, racism, and preferential treatment trump qualifications within the hiring process;

“There are many intersectionality’s at play when thinking about local hiring within the standard hiring process.”

“Jobs being posted when they already know who they want to hire, so even though I was interviewed, I had no hope of getting the job.”

“There have been times when I applied for jobs and we knew that the manager/department was looking to hire someone they knew personally. In the past there are a lot of hiring where friends and family were given preferential treatment over qualifications.”

The "privileged" are given promotion and opportunities. Very limited "black" exposure even though you possess all the required skills necessary to effectively perform the duties and responsibilities YOU ARE PASSED OVER!!

“I find that the majority of the time, the person who is hired instead of me is a white person. I find this mind-boggling because York is a diverse institution and a lot of the positions that are directly related to working with students are still going to white people.”

- The process for moving from contract to full-time position can be unclear. Priority is given in unionized positions to seniority or other groups first

“Anytime there is a job posting with YUSA that I feel I am qualified for and have the skills to perform the job, I always encounter lots of barriers, one of which is that priority is given to the YUSA group before any other groups can be able to apply.”

“You find anyone in CUPE group (i.e., custodians) does not get any opportunities for career advancement, so it's like you are stuck there.”

Keeping Staff Employed

This research wanted to understand if retention was an issue with this group of employees, as **the goal in the community is to see long-term job potential for residents**. As noted earlier in this report, many respondents were committed to long-term service to the university. There were incentives to stay at York, including a good benefits package, training opportunities/tuition waivers, and opportunities for “moving up” if under the “right” management. However, there were also stories of employees who were very frustrated with the environment and chose to leave York.

Learning/Skills Development and Resources and Supports

The project also wanted to understand if employees felt supported through skill development as well as resources and support. There was a strong interest in career advancement and people felt that York would offer them a place to grow and develop. Many felt that York had great potential for this and most indicated a strong desire to grow into their work at York, even though some barriers were identified.

“I would like to build skills that will help me move around specifically up, for example management skills”

“I think that the current offering[s] are quite good but I think that there should be a mandatory program for anyone currently in a position that is responsible for overseeing others, like a supervisor or team lead. I think that piece is missing, generally at the university - it should be mandatory upon hiring/retroactively for those who are already in those roles.”

There was some indication that the ability to access these things, however, was contingent on a manager who supported them, and this type of leadership was inconsistent across the university. Some other barriers to retention include:

- Pay rate for YUTA positions are very low and YUTA as a stepping stone to on-going positions is unclear
- Requirement of advanced degrees when not necessary (i.e., master’s degree for an advising position)
- There is an inconsistency in feedback provided to different employees by different managers. Some in higher/permanent positions receive consistent attention and feedback whereas those in YUTA positions might not. This can be a factor in why some advance faster and further than others

“First, taking the department/area out of the hiring process (which, I've experienced, isn't the case in all areas of the university) means that positions are being filled by hiring managers alone, in some cases, hiring managers that don't have any understanding of the position or the needs of the department/area; two, in two particular cases, positions are filled based on personal biases/promises, rather than the qualifications of the candidate or, indeed, in union positions, the terms set out in the collective agreement.”

Many respondents were interested in training related to management skills and leadership, e.g., in order to support moving up from YUSA to CPM positions. Depending on the position,

Employee Learning/Skills development can be useful. If in a more niche/experienced type of position, the general workshops are not as useful.

The project also wanted to understand if employees felt they had the resources and support to continue to grow into meaningful careers. More than 50% of respondents indicated that mental health resources would be helpful. Some noted that there was too much red tape to participate in training opportunities. It was also noted by a number of participants that the University lacks specific resources for Black employees and that management staff need to understand current issues, i.e., Black Lives Matter. (This survey was done prior to the Black Inclusion Framework at York). Too often it was noted that “there are unwritten rules that you are not aware of”.

Sense of Inclusion

A pervading sentiment among respondents, both through the survey and focus groups, was that York does not live up to its statements of being an inclusive workplace. It was clear through this research that this is an area of work that needs to be undertaken if York is to see success as an anchoring employer in the community. Some participants felt the relationship between York and the community is very much a one-way relationship.

“The University can strengthen its mission and values around inclusivity by eliminating existing barriers around hiring practices.”

“Seems to do a lot mainly for PR. People are treated differently based on the color of their skin. York tries to separate itself from the bigger Jane Finch community. York is able to access the community easily but doesn’t enable the same easy access for the Jane Finch residents.”

It is clear that for York to be considered an employer in the Black Creek Community, there are steps that must be taken in alignment with other influential initiatives at York, including the broader [Anchor YorkU](#) implementation (social procurement, community engagement, infrastructure, employment), the recent [Black Inclusion Framework](#) and [Black Inclusion Action Plan](#), and the [York U Sustainability Plan](#) to name a few.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made to begin the process of developing a local hiring strategy as part of York University's larger human resources development plans.

- 1. Develop an HR policy statement documenting York's intent and commitment to advancing ongoing, living-waged jobs for local residents based on the Anchor YorkU framework.**
- 2. Develop a local hiring strategy that would include shared community-university principles, hard local hiring targets, timelines, financial commitments (including how the university supports the community to be involved in the work), and stakeholder roles and responsibilities.**

Potential actions include:

- › If two candidates of similar experience, skills and competency are considered for a position and one is a local resident, priority is given to the local resident
- › Hiring locally must become a metric in each departmental hiring plan
- › Work intentionally at each department level to review how local employees are being supported to increase job abilities and competencies. Include local employment into departmental human resource planning and evaluation
- › Embed local hiring into York hiring culture to demonstrate York's commitment to being a local employer
- › More consistency in feedback from supervisors with attention to career advancement and succession planning for employees
- › Hiring managers to provide feedback to local employees who are interviewed, but are not selected for a position
- › Address inconsistent wages and training for YUTA staff, including inconsistency in pathways from YUTA to other YUSA and CPM opportunities at York and lack of clarity around temporary roles, such as pay structure, timeframes, awareness of access to internal postings, etc.

- 3. Develop hard targets for local inclusive hiring with community partners that are specific to each of the four postal codes, with prioritization for the Jane-Finch neighbourhood and Black, Indigenous, and other systemically marginalized populations.**

Potential actions include:

- › Investigate recruitment trends over the last 3-5 years
- › Conduct scan of job descriptions and openings over last 1-2 years to understand qualifications and demand across departments
- › Assess existing and future job descriptions to ensure there are no unnecessary requirements that would create barriers for local residents to apply or get hired
- › Work with community leaders and partners and City of Toronto to access and assess local demographics and labour market data to help match local skills to employment opportunities at York
- › Align hard targets with the recommendations in the new Jane-Finch Community Benefits Framework
- › Learn from local Jane-Finch leaders and best practices in workforce development strategies
- › Develop “how to” protocols, processes, and tools to guide the implementation of the hard targets across the university
- › Develop clear definitions of target populations with the local community
- › Build partnerships within the community / develop framework around hiring from the community

4. Address racial and other barriers to hiring and career advancement.

Potential actions include:

- › Develop and implement an ongoing educational program for hiring managers to address issues of racism, bias, etc. during the hiring process to improve the hiring practice and align with institutional priorities (UAP, Anti-black Racism - Black Inclusion Framework, Anchor YorkU)
- › Address challenges with crossing union affiliations and collective agreements
- › Train managers to balance needs and skills with seniority when making hiring and promotion decisions
- › Focus on staff training instead of always requiring advanced degrees during the hiring process
- › More resources and support for Black staff

- › Increase awareness, access and participation in internal training opportunities, with a specific focus on supporting leadership and management so local residents can progress in their jobs
- › Encourage culture of learning and supervisors to support their staff to take time for training as part of their work

5. Increase recruitment of local residents by supporting networking and mentorship opportunities between current/former residents employed at York and community members. Amplify informal support systems. Identify, develop and test place-based outreach and recruitment strategies in partnership with residents, community organizations, and employment agencies/programs.

Potential actions include:

- › Identify funding sources at York and/or through other partners to support community-based outreach, recruitment, and mentorship on a long-term basis
- › Coordinate outreach and recruitment with other local hiring and community benefits initiatives already underway in the Jane-Finch/Black Creek community
- › Distribute clear, accessible job postings within the community
- › Develop direct points of contact between York HR and community organizations and employment agencies to help both local residents and staff navigate the hiring process
- › Provide training for local agency staff and community leaders on how to use York's application portal

“Not much support for folks who weren't familiar with YorkU hiring process. There wasn't a lot of options to communicate with HR at York. Could definitely be more information sessions in the community or connections.”

6. In partnership with local residents, community organizations, and networks/initiatives, create an employment pathway for interested residents that would include specific training for York systems (Microsoft Teams, Outlook, specific departmental data systems, organizational values, organizational orientation, etc.).

Potential actions include:

- › Identify funding sources at York and/or from other partners to support the development and operations of the employment pathway

- Coordinate with existing local employment initiatives and pathways under development in the Jane-Finch/Black Creek area, e.g., Jane-Finch Employment Collective
- Rebuild partnerships with local agencies (community and employment agencies)
- Liaison between Community and York HR supported by York-TD CEC

7. Develop an accessible and transparent data tracking, analysis, and reporting system to ensure hard targets are being met and other actions/recommendations are being implemented with appropriate timelines.

Potential actions include:

- Establish a community-university steering committee to oversee and support the implementation of a local inclusive hiring strategy. With expanded membership from local communities, the existing Anchor YorkU Employment Working Group could potentially take on this role
- Ensure regular reporting to the local community with clear data to demonstrate progress on local hiring.
- Work with the community to identify key indicators for data tracking, appropriate reporting structures and methods, and processes for sharing information with local residents and partners
- Develop other mechanisms/platforms for community/employee feedback and learning to evaluate the success of local hiring strategies/actions, i.e. Anchor YorkU Employment Working Group
- Allocate dedicated York staff resources and time to continuously implement, monitor, and adapt strategies that support local hiring
- Identify funds from York and/or other partners for community leaders and partners from the Jane-Finch/Black Creek area to play an active role in monitoring and reporting on an ongoing basis

8. Align local hiring with Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives at York.

Potential actions include:

- Address disconnects between inclusion statements and York actions/environment
- Hire more people of colour, promote them and treat them well

9. Align local hiring with the Anchor YorkU Social Procurement Working Group.

Potential actions include:

- › Coordinate with campus service and construction sub-contractors (i.e. Aramark, construction companies etc.) to include a local hiring strategy with hard hiring targets and living waged jobs

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