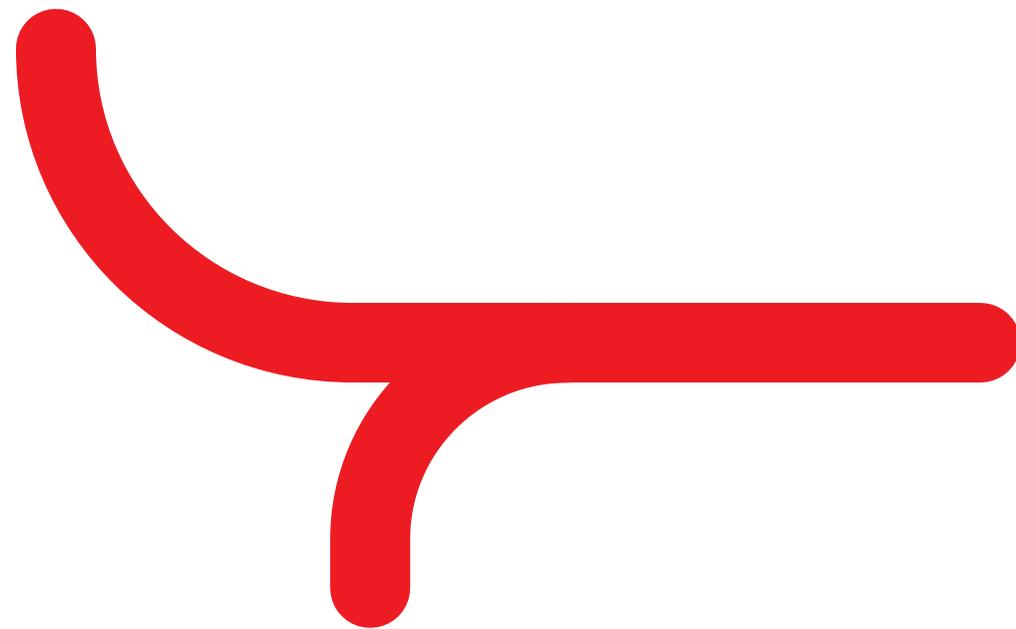


# FROM THE MIND



# TO THE HEART:

Youth Perspectives & Recommendations  
on Equity in Corporate Citizenship

IM△GINE  
CANADA



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## Acknowledgements

**This report has Imagine Canada, with generous support from the RBC Foundation, partnering with AgentsC Inc. to gain a new view of the corporate community investment profession, and practices that specifically focus on diversity.**

Imagine Canada is a national charitable organization whose cause is social good in Canada. We work to bolster the charities, nonprofits, and social entrepreneurs that build, enrich, and define our nation and the communities they support around the globe. For over a decade, Imagine Canada's corporate community investment research has provided a unique view of current practices and tools for effective social impact.

AgentsC Inc. is an international, B-Corp Certified consulting company based in Toronto, Canada. Founded in 2015, AgentsC offers strategic solutions to socially and environmentally conscious organizations around the world. Drawing on the African tradition of Ubuntu (I am because we are), AgentsC is guided by our trademark principle, Equity Philanthropy™ – the belief that love of community

and social justice form an essential alchemy for tackling the world's biggest problems, as expressed through the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, and the World Health Organization Social Determinants of Health.

This research, conducted by AgentsC, provides data-supported perspectives and insights that will empower corporate community investment professionals to tailor practices and strategies to incorporate justice, access, inclusion, diversity and equity (JAIDE) principles that will help them achieve their missions.

Those who were quoted have reviewed this report and confirmed their intended meaning was expressed accurately, and we thank them for their candid contributions.

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Foundation

# *Preface*



## Preface

**The first report in our two-part series on corporate community investment “[From Mind to Heart: Challenging the status quo and advancing equity in corporate social investment](#)”, examined the various aspects of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)<sup>1</sup> and corporate community investment as a practice and their intersections with justice, access, inclusion, diversity and equity (JAIDE)<sup>2</sup>.**

The first report focused on the overlooked perspectives of Black, Indigenous, South Asian, South Asian-Muslim and 2SLGBTQI CSR practitioners in some of corporate Canada's largest companies. Using mixed method research, CSR practitioners leading and involved in their company's community investment programs share their unique perspectives for achieving social impact. The report closed with the question of “What's next?” and suggested a number of tactical steps toward meaningful change.

As we contemplate the future direction of corporate community investment in Canada, it seems apt to bring in the voices of those who are just about to embark on their careers in this space—young people and future CSR practitioners in corporate community impact. The second report of this two-part series presents the findings from a focus group discussion with young university students studying CSR in Canada.

# ***Student Youth Perspectives on CSR***



## Student Youth Perspectives on CSR

**Often overlooked in industry research, we felt that the voices of young people and their diverse perspectives were important to this series. For anyone committed to bringing about meaningful change to CSR, young people's views are crucial considerations. How are business students learning about corporate community investment?**

How do they see CSR and principles of JAIDE being integrated into corporate practices? What kind of CSR world do they wish to see and what role do they see themselves playing? We reached out to five young university students in second and fourth year undergraduate and postgraduate (MBA) studies from Queens Smith School of Business and McGill Desautels Faculty of Management and asked them to participate in a focus group to discuss these questions and more. This report explores these areas as told by these young people.

In addition to various views on their CSR training, JAIDE practices, and future goals for CSR, the future CSR practitioners who participated in our focus group represent a diverse segment of racial and cultural backgrounds, gender, and sexual orientation, as well as experiences and personal goals.

The students expressed an intentionality toward community investment and broader aspirations for the field. As such, they seemed both corporate- and socially-conscious, and skeptical and astute when it came to assessing the value of their CSR education.

As majors in corporate-related studies such as business, commerce, and finance, the students felt that the CSR and JAIDE portions of their education were insufficient and only gave a cursory treatment to an otherwise increasingly demanding and important field:

*[EDI education is] something I really had to go out of the way to pursue. I had to specifically choose classes in those subjects that interested me. Does it come up in required classes or classes that, finance, international business, etc.? Yes, it does come up. [But] is it in depth? ... Academia is a slow environment and business, especially a Bachelors of Commerce, is historically rather conservative when it comes to social changes and economic changes.*

*I think we're at a very bizarre period of time right now where the business schools aren't offering mandatory sustainable finance classes and sustainable case consulting classes... So that's why I'm doing as much external education as possible because I think I'll be at a disadvantage later when the universities figured out that this is necessary and it is the future.*

## Student Youth Perspectives on CSR

Despite the general consensus on the insufficiency of CSR learning, one participant, a graduate student, disagreed and attributed the shortcoming to being at the undergraduate level:

*[For a master's student] corporate social responsibility is a full-fledged course, just like any other course. So there are two huge projects that you have to do, one individually and one, which is a group one. And then your final capstone that you submit for your MBA has to have a social impact component to it...So from an academic standpoint in the MBA programs, I can say at least 3 to 4 courses probably have some component of CSR. And then the social impact certification is just a plus on top of that, where you actually get to do volunteering hours and stuff if you really want to major in that sort of or go into that area. And I had an interest, I took that, but that was optional, of course.*

On the topic of JAIDE, specifically, students expressed various opinions on their educational experiences and its role in preparing them for the CSR world:

*I think it really comes down to the person. Like as far as my course goes, there are a few courses with professors that you can tell, care, and they*

*do want to educate their students. And then in a lot of other courses, it's just a buzzword. It's a total buzz word. The teachers don't care, half the students don't care. But I don't necessarily think that's all the fault of the university or all the fault of one organization. I just think it's, we're evolving out of a society where prejudice is acceptable and we're evolving into a more inclusive one. So I just think we're witnessing that transition where it's 50/50, whether people are serious or people are using it as a buzzword.*

*I would say so for myself, because I just naturally care. Also, just because I'm part of the smaller kind of LGBTQ minority group on my campus. So I feel like I would want allies, so I would be an ally for other groups. So I particularly pay attention to that. So yeah, I would say I'm fairly equipped, but we'll become more hopefully over the course of my education.*

*I think from my perspective in the sciences and economics, it's not something that's brought up, right? I don't think it's being brought up at all.*

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*I think that's the age-long debate. Right. Is that, should sustainability be something that's specialized sustainability, or, should it be something that's specialized and siloed? Or should it be something that is applied throughout business practices in general? Should everybody be an EDI [expert]?*

Regardless of the different experiences in EDI education, there was agreement amongst the students on the necessity of incorporating JAIDE into training and accreditation. Students expressed that schools will need to respond to the growing demand for this type of social consciousness and fully incorporate JAIDE into CSR education—and not as a mere add-on—in order to better prepare future CSR practitioners for a world where social and environmental sustainability are human-based challenges:

*I do think a lot of these classes where we explore these topics [EDI education] in depth, are driven by student demand. Business schools see the students are interested in these subjects and that companies are hiring people who have this kind of knowledge. And a lot of it is driven by student demand. There's no point in having a class if students aren't going to register for it. And if students keep signing up for classes and*

*giving good reviews and say that it's something worth doing, then the faculty does listen. And I think that's important for us to know that, it's important for us to try to drive that difference with what we want to see change within our faculties as well.*

*Corporations are getting bigger and richer and our problems are getting bigger and more serious...If we want to continue to make money, we need to balance the scale in a way that's going to allow us to continue to do so and to solve the problems that will allow people to continue using our platform.*

meaning The students also had high expectations for CSR, noting the critical integration of JAIDE and the need for doing business differently and conscientiously in the future. Several students spoke of the tension between profitability and sustainability, and the challenge of trying to strike a balance between the two seemingly opposing forces:

*And I think when people or like the corporate world realizes that this is both EDI and CSR, and sustainability are extremely crucial to our future as a species. Things will start to change*

## Student Youth Perspectives on CSR

*and evolve, but I think this realization is what will kick off the maturity of this industry and this way of thinking... Indigenous practices are applicable to CSR, which is really interesting because in the COP 26 Glasgow event they said the same thing, how they were like utilizing Indigenous research to actually create new R&D, which I thought was so cool.*

*[...] We're spending a lot of time and energy, kind of making things look pretty and kind of lying to ourselves and like, you know, saying, yeah, yeah, we're doing all this...But when you actually look at the actual impact you're having or the actual change you're making, it's very minimal...yeah, we're raising awareness, we're encouraging such things. But I think we kind of need to stop lying to ourselves and we need to kind of be harsher with our approach to changing these corporations, to changing the top. I think that we need to do things that are maybe not as visible but have a much stronger impact and that are actually going to go shake these roots and the skeleton of the backs of corporations.*

*I think the funny thing about CSR, sustainability initiatives in corporations is that it's very, even in academia, it's very much still a hero culture<sup>3</sup> thing...Some profs are really passionate and you can tell they genuinely care and you can learn a lot from them. But it's difficult to get it ingrained into institutional knowledge and into part of the practice. It's just that one person and that one person may make a big impact and that one person may recruit a bunch of more people. But at the end of the day, it's hero culture. You can't imagine an entire organization's accounting practice or legal practice or even like HR practice, relying on one person's hero culture. Right? But that's unfortunately how CSR is. And I think that's the biggest gap in terms of maturity of CSR and sustainability initiatives in the business world is, that we need to move on from that and we need to move it into a matter of best practice and institutional knowledge.*

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Key Takeaways for the Future of Community Investment

When asked about the kinds of changes they would like to see in corporate community investment, the students spoke to the aspects of CSR that they see as fundamental barriers to bringing about meaningful change:

*It's very paradoxical because obviously EDI and sustainability initiatives affect marginalized groups the most, yet you see them as very underrepresented in the conversation. And I think it really comes down to not wanting to discredit yourself. I think that's a big one. You know, if I stand up and I start saying we should care about EDI, am I going to be seen as that one person that's coming in with an agenda? And that's, is that going to be bad for my career development, which is extremely upsetting that that's something we have to consider. But I think ultimately, considering the perspectives of Indigenous people, black people and women are going to be the most fundamental pivoting points and empowering these groups to really feel comfortable standing up for their communities and standing up for themselves, and what they believe in, in the corporate world is really going to be pivotal as well.*

*[...] I think what it all boils down to is instilling in every manager and every employee to do the right thing. And I think one training which sort of encompasses all of this is empathy training. And I think if you build that in, you are consistently reinforcing the idea of doing the right thing. EDI of equity...What I'm trying to say over here is, you have the structural platforms, you have every resource available, but when, the more you bring it up, the more you reinforce. That's where you actually drive a behaviour change.*

*[...] Concept of conscious capitalism, which is the balancing of the scale. A little bit of it is de-emphasizing profit and a lot of it is emphasizing social impact and sustainability. And like you said, if companies want to continue to operate, they're going to need to adapt. And at this point, with global supply chain issues, carbon emission policies and DC disclosures by country, it's a competitive advantage to adapt. It's necessary, like whether people want to shut their eyes and*

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*pretend it's not real... People will need to get their carbon down. It's like they have no choice. If you want to operate, you have to abide by the rules. And the longer people put this off, the more their longevity disintegrates. And yeah, so in a perfect world, people understand this and are kind of seeing sustainability and CSR as an opportunity rather than a great threat to their existence. Because it doesn't have to be.*

*A lot of companies today kind of approach these CSR problems and even with ESG, it really comes from the angle of like ESG is just that checklist of like meeting these standards just because they have to. Just because that's what they're told. And it's moving in that direction. But it's really not part of that backbone and it's not like part of their company structure and their company goal. So I think to answer the question of like being in that driver's seat and how to really lead that, from my perspective, it's really about making that the backbone of the whole company, in terms of, not just having*

*training down the line for employees to be educated on what it is, but really ensuring that it's a priority in the sense of the structure of a company. So it flows through and it follows through in practice. So essentially, really just moving away from that kind of mentality of that, companies just have to check off these certain things to meet these standards. They're really making it like a genuine priority, that's how they're going to be able to be sustainable in their organization and move forward and continue to practice in their business.*

The session concluded with young people's thoughts and aspirations for the future of CSR, and some ideas on how they would bring about meaning and impact into their work as socially conscious and JAIDE-focused business leaders:

*But I'm wondering if in the future there's actually going to be a new line on the P&L (profit & loss) statement or a formula, which will be particularly tied to the negative impact that you have on the environment or whatever. That's my first thing. The second one was*

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*empathy, no brainer, sort of moving forward with active listening. And the third one that I have is culture. I think all of what we're talking about, we keep saying buzzword, buzzword is because it's not ingrained into culture. Because culture is something you can't see. It's that side of the organization that you cannot see. And I think that is where all of this is going to come into, but in many cases I think culture is created at the top and it trickles down. So how do you change the board of executives to not all be white dudes? Maybe some kind of pipeline, something maybe, better recruiting? I don't know. Like it's possible, but I think it just takes a lot of resources and people don't want to cause waves. But yeah, I think culture comes from top down, and then that's kind of where the EDI component comes into all of this. How do you actually funnel, good, good-hearted,*

*empathetic people that actually care. And it's not just a buzzword. How do you get them in those leadership positions where they're still capable of running a full business and have a heart? So I think creating pipelines any way possible is kind of the way this has to go or else nothing will change.*

*So what if there's, maybe not a way, but like kind of empowering it up from the bottom and kind of like, how do we enforce the change from the bottom up? And kind of we look at that idea of majority and all of a sudden, right, in a 100 person company, if the 80 people at the bottom are all the ones that are enforcing and empowering a change than the 20 people at the top won't have to do, we'll have to do something about it. Whereas if it's the 20 people at the top not caring, then the 80 people, you know, they kind of, they won't have to care either.*

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*If we pull back from this whole corporate of private sector conversation, I think the truth to mainstreaming sustainability, EDI, is that it really needs to be a multisectoral effort and it really needs to be, it really, well, my background from sustainability is that I came from, I came from the non-profit side of sustainability into the sustainable business side. And people love to say it's because I was a sell out, I was not a sell out. It was because as much as I love the work and I was very passionate about the*

*cause in grassroots sustainability work, it was so exhausting. There was so much passion, but there were so little resources, so little capital. It was so hard to get anything to move. It felt like we were doing the same thing over and over and over every single day and it was so hard to get parts to move. Meanwhile, in business, there's so much human capital, there's so much financial capital, there's so much innovation. And that's not being capitalized a lot of times to make good in this society.*

# *Key Takeaways for the Future of Community Investment*



## Key Takeaways for the Future of Community Investment

**These young people's insights provide a glimpse into their vision for community investment, their views on what is lacking in their education, what they perceive as barriers to doing good corporate social impact work, and where their aspirations are for doing things differently and better.**

While they share a similar desire as their CSR counterparts (those interviewees and survey respondents in our first report) to bring about radical transformation, tomorrow's CSR leaders are witnessing different kinds of social challenges and transformation. They are also hyperaware, astute, and have clear ideas for the kind of change they wish to see within the corporate sector.

Despite this focus and desire for change, they recognize the fundamental barriers to realizing their vision, beginning with how they are trained prior to entering the CSR field. They regard JAIDE as an integral component to doing both business and social good, and feel its absence in training and education as a foundational misstep. Similar to the CSR practitioner interviewees of the "From the Mind to the Heart: Advancing Equity In Corporate

Social Investment" report, students identified the lack of relevant training in the areas of JAIDE and JAIDE practices within their education to be stymieing real social change.

The voices of future CSR practitioners were included in this study to demonstrate the extent of change required to achieve true JAIDE-oriented practices within CSR. They were also included to show how biased practices and prejudice can become perpetuated within the sector when they are fostered at the training and education level. While we work toward rethinking and reframing community investment as part of doing business, we include the following takeaways that speak to the implications of education and training on the future of JAIDE-oriented community investment.

## Key Takeaways for the Future of Community Investment

### **1. Empathy must be at the heart of community investment.**

At the heart of young people's connection to corporate community investment is empathy. They are motivated to do good because being connected to the world around them is important just as much as doing business. This basic, fundamental human quality will be a draw for people entering the CSR profession and will separate transactional CSR practices from the meaningful, JAIDE-oriented CSR community investment actions.

### **2. Prioritize diversity within corporate community investment to attract young professionals.**

The increasing diversity—including racial, ethnic, gender, age, and sexual orientation—within the CSR profession is mirrored in schools and training. There is desire and expectation for diverse students to see themselves represented within the corporate community investment sector, and to see marginalized community members have a seat and voice at the CSR table.

### **3. Corporate hero culture and opacity undermine CSR.**

Students are challenging the conventional practices of CSR, including the roles and power imbalance between corporations and the communities they serve. They are skeptical of corporate hero culture and the lack of transparency that unduly valorizes the work of CSR. Instead, there is expectation for clear recognition, reporting, and accountability that speak to a company's social impact outcomes, both positive and negative.

### **4. An in-depth focus on JAIDE and CSR must be embedded in business education and training.**

Tomorrow's business leaders are learning to adapt to rapidly changing economies, politics, and social contexts. They understand that CSR is an integral component to building successful businesses. They also recognize that CSR can't function effectively if it's not meaningfully steeped in JAIDE. As the demand for ethical, JAIDE-oriented business and CSR practices continues to grow, schools will need to offer solid foundations in CSR and JAIDE as an integral part of business training at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

### **5. Effective CSR will have executive investment and oversight.**

Students recognize that meaningful, successful CSR will need to be incorporated into organizations at large. It will need to be endorsed and promoted across all departments and levels, especially at the executive level—only then would CSR receive the investment and oversight needed to effectively contribute to meaningful social change.

## References

- 1 The different connotations and usage of the terms notwithstanding, “corporate community investment” is used interchangeably with corporate social responsibility (CSR) in this discussion. Key to our interpretation is the specific emphasis on social responsibility as it relates to financial donations made from a corporation in support of charities and nonprofit organizations. Similarly, “JAIDE” is used in the same way as “JEDI”, “DE&I”, “IDEA”, “EDI” or “D&I”. This interchangeability reflects the different usage of the terms by respondents.
- 2 See above note on various terminology.
- 3 The term ‘hero culture’ used here could refer to group circumstances where a few individuals are striving for a cultural norm in a group of people where the majority of the group sees endeavors for such a cultural norm as aspirational at best.

## Credits

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