

RBC and community leaders: Scholarships must change to be more inclusive

How expansion of the RBC Future Launch scholarship program will help meet the needs of 500+ Indigenous, Black, and all future-focused youth each year

DR. ANDRÉ MCDONALD,
MARK BECKLES,
DR. WANDA WUTTUNEE

When many post-secondary students returned to their physical classrooms a little over a month ago, we were reminded of the systemic barriers that have disadvantaged communities across the country for generations.

In contrast to the many downsides of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was at least one silver lining: it democratized access to resources. As we were all forced to embrace virtual life and learning, anyone with an internet connection now had opportunity to find supports and services online.

This digitizing of resources allowed for many marginalized individuals – especially those in rural/remote parts of the country – to better access the tools generally deemed essential to succeed both academically and in life.

However, the long-awaited ‘return to normal’ threatens the loss of this progress and potential relapse towards disadvantages faced by young Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) individuals for far too long.

Research continues to show that BIPOC youth face unique challenges and inequities when preparing for their future.

In 2017, York University research showed that 20% of Black students dropped out of Canadian high schools – double the rate of White or other racialized students. In 2019, Indigenous Corporate Training Inc. reported that 33% of Aboriginal individuals had no high school or equivalent certificate – compared to 18% of other Canadians.

For many, it is difficult to commit to learning when there is no pathway to prosperity ahead.

If we are to succeed as a country, all present and future leaders must have equal and equitable opportunity today. Without proper equity and inclusion represented in our workforce, we will fail at creating the diverse companies and communities that enable us to achieve our greatest collective potential. We must let BIPOC youth know there is a future for them.

The solution to these issues is not just additional funding, but offering the tools and resources that pinpoint the systemic barriers facing underrepresented youth. Addressing these unique challenges requires a response that is equally tailored, incorporating the insights and lived experiences of leaders from the communities of these young people.

That is why we formed advisory committees to help identify the barriers that face Indigenous and



RBC Future Launch scholarships will support 500 youth each year, including dedicated programs for Indigenous and Black students. *SUPPLIED*



Since 1992, RBC has awarded more than \$1.8 million in scholarships to 198 Indigenous youth. *SUPPLIED*

Black students today. The committees were comprised of academic, business, and non-profit leaders from these communities – as well as members

mendations of these vital partners, we have expanded and relaunched the scholarships offered by RBC Future Launch – the bank’s 10-year, \$500 million commitment to helping Canadian youth prepare for the jobs of tomorrow.

RBC Future Launch has hundreds of community partnerships which help youth attain meaningful employment through access to: practical work experience, skills development opportunities, networking solutions, and mental well-being supports and services.

This new roster of scholarships will add to that offering by enabling over 500 youth to more successfully pursue their education and professional development. Each year, the recipients of these scholarships will receive: enhanced funding, dedicated mentorship, and opportunities to develop a professional network and work experience.

Post-secondary education is becoming in-

creasingly unaffordable, leaving it out of reach for many from historically disadvantaged communities. Enhancing a previous RBC student award program, the scholarship for Indigenous youth now offers up to \$10,000 a year to 20 post-secondary students (for up to four years) – up from its previous \$5,000. As a new offering, the scholarship for Black youth will begin at \$10,000 a year for 20 post-secondary students (for up to four years).

However, the future of Canada’s workforce is not solely reliant on those who pursue post-secondary education. The third scholarship offered by RBC Future Launch will be awarded to 500 youth who are part-time or non-students from all backgrounds. Each can receive \$1,500 to go towards a learning opportunity of their choice, including: short-term courses or workshops, certificate programs, equipment or books, or any activity that will help

advance their education.

But funding is not enough to guarantee success. Through the 2016 census, Statistics Canada found that even after accounting for differences

In 2017, York University research showed that 20% of Black students dropped out of Canadian high schools – double the rate of White or other racialized students.

Going forward, both Indigenous and Black recipients will receive mentorship and career supports tailored to their needs.

secondary graduation rates for Black youth and other youth remains.

To help ensure the recipients can not only enroll at a post-secondary institution, but succeed and graduate, the scholarships for Indigenous and Black youth now provide additional supports and services informed by the recommendations from our advisory committees. Going forward, both Indigenous and Black recipients will receive mentorship and career supports tailored to their needs.

Even with mentorship, navigating the challenges of a post-secondary education can be difficult – but translating that knowledge to a practical work environment is often even harder. Without the right network of support or learnings from an internship, it is not uncommon to struggle in making the transition.

To aid recipients in leveraging their academic success in the world of work, both the scholarships for Indigenous and Black youth will provide opportunities to find an internship and support to build a professional network.

By working in partnership with Universities Canada (a national leader in scholarship management for more than 50 years) and our selection committees, we are confident the most deserving applicants will receive these life-changing resources.

Each of us has an opportunity to help create the future we want to see. Now empowered by three of the most impactful scholarships that exist for young people today, we cannot wait to see what the 500 recipients do to shape theirs.

To learn more about these scholarships, including how to apply or be nominated, visit rbc.com/futurelaunchscholarships.

Dr. André McDonald is a professor of Mechanical Engineering at the University of Alberta and Director of the ELITE Program for Black Youth – and acted as a member of the advisory committee which helped to design the RBC Future Launch Scholarship for Black Youth.

Mark Beckles is Vice-President, Social Impact & Innovation at RBC. He is responsible for the strategy and implementation of RBC Future Launch, which is RBC’s largest-ever commitment to a social issue.

Dr. Wanda Wuttunee is a retired professor from the Department of Native Studies at the University of Manitoba – and will act as a member of the selection committee to help adjudicate the RBC Future Launch scholarships for Indigenous Youth.

of RBC’s internal, employee-led resource groups. Leveraging the recom-

in socioeconomic and family characteristics, the gap between post-sec-