

# THE PROUD PROJECT

## *Le Projet PROUD*

A Disability, Employment, and Equity Research Hub

*Un centre de recherche sur l'invalidité, l'emploi et l'équité*

## ANNUAL REPORT 2024–2025

Affiliated with:

The University of Toronto Scarborough  
Centre for Global Disability Studies, UTSC  
Toronto Metropolitan University  
School of Disability Studies, TMU  
Office of Social Innovation, TMU

[www.theproudproject.ca](http://www.theproudproject.ca)

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# Message from the Co-Executive Directors

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Dear PROUD Friends, Staff, Board members, research Fellows and Associates and Supporters,

We are proud to share The PROUD Project's Annual Report for 2024-2025—a year of remarkable growth, meaningful research and deepening community connections and advocacy.

PROUD (Phenomenological Research/Remedies On the Under-inclusion of Disabled adults) was founded on a simple but powerful conviction that disabled people deserve to be heard, valued and fully included in the workforce and in society. As Canada's only bilingual (French and English) 100% disability-led research hub focused on disability inclusion, and health and employment equity; every project we undertake, every article we publish and every podcast episode we release is shaped by that conviction.

This past year:

- PROUD analysed the prodigious data from our landmark multi-country qualitative study on disability employment. With the aid of the qualitative research software, NVivo, we gathered and assessed a rich data set from Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Belgium, bringing us closer to a comprehensive, evidence-based understanding of the conditions which enable the inclusion of disabled workers across different jurisdictions and cultures. We wrote and revised an 8,000-word article for Disability and Society which outlines an overview of lessons gleaned from the five-country, four-year study—it is currently undergoing the next stage of review. PROUD team members are now working on a number of country specific articles
- PROUD also launched and oversaw the Accessible Mapping Project in Toronto's Historic Queer Village. We partnered with the University of Toronto's Faculty of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy to create a team of 8 OT students who did a clinical/community placement under our supervision. Our co-Executive Director, Aruna Mitra acted as preceptor for these professional graduate students. PROUD revised the notion of accessibility by coaching the students to observe granular details which make substantial differences to people needing access. For example, we mapped lighting quality, types of flooring, bathroom stall measurements, and rest areas for guide dogs. The resulting map of the Queer Village can be accessed on our website
- PROUD partnered with Eviance in putting on their Fall Institute 2025: Co-creating Leadership Spaces with Youth with Disabilities, which was a four-day virtual workshop/webinar 12, 13, 17, and 18 November 2025. This virtual conference featured 4 members of the PROUD community: Isabelle Avakumovich-Pointon (PROUD research associate), Ness Maloney (PROUD fellow), Kayla Saunders (PROUD fellow), and Matthew Palnychuk (PROUD fellow)
- PROUD launched the third Season of its podcast: Broadcastability, which amplifies the voices of disabled people. This season we speak to researchers, artists, clinicians and advocates around the world (We produce episodes in both French and English)

- We initiated the PROUD Fellows Program to encourage the networking of upcoming disability researchers, artists and advocates in Canada.

We are deeply grateful to our funding partners who have enabled this research and advocacy: University of Toronto Scarborough, Centre for Global Disability Studies, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, TechNation, Employment and Social Development Canada and generous private donors.

As we move forward, we know that the time-limited grant money that these organizations provided is now running out and PROUD needs to find alternate funders to continue its work.

To our Board of Directors, research associates and fellows and to our dedicated PROUD staff: thank you. Your commitment to anti-ableism and disability justice motivates us every day.

With gratitude and solidarity,



**Chloë G. K. Atkins, PhD**  
Co-Executive Director & Board Chair



**Aruna L. Mitra, BScOT, MEd**  
Co-Executive Director

## Land Acknowledgment

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The PROUD Project is located in Toronto, Ontario, and acknowledges that our work takes place on the traditional territories of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishinaabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples. We are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.

We recognize that colonialism and ableism are deeply intertwined, and we are committed to research and advocacy that honours Indigenous rights, disability justice, and the principles of equity and inclusion for all.



# Who We Are

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The PROUD Project / Le Projet PROUD is a non-profit research hub dedicated to investigating how we can improve disabled persons' inclusion in society and, in particular, the workforce. We are anti-ableist in our approach to research, workshoping and advocacy. We are Canada's only bilingual, LGBTQ2S+ disability-led research centre on disability equity.

PROUD stands for **P**henomenological **R**esearch/**R**emedies **O**n the **U**nder-inclusion of **D**isabled adults. We produce original qualitative and quantitative research across multiple sectors and countries, offering evidence-based recommendations to employers, governments, policy makers, educational institutions, clinicians and advocacy organizations.

## Our Mission

To encourage the inclusion and integration of disabled people so that they fulfil their human potential and so the community benefits from their contributions and talent.

## Our Vision

To be a Canadian bilingual research unit whose work on disability forms the basis for robust advocacy for the inclusion and integration of disabled people locally, nationally, and internationally.

## Why It Matters

According to Statistics Canada, only 59% of the 16 million Canadians with disabilities aged 25–64 are employed, compared to 80% of Canadians without a disability. Despite human rights and employment equity legislation, disabled workers continue to face significant systemic barriers to securing and maintaining dignified employment. PROUD exists to understand and dismantle those barriers.



## Our Work: What We Do

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The PROUD Project conducts original research, offers professional training, and produces public-facing resources that advance the inclusion of disabled individuals everywhere. Our aim is to encourage the integration and inclusion of people with disabilities so that society can benefit from their talents and capacities. We propose that qualified disabled persons should experience full engagement with the economic aspects of their society and environment. Disabled people are an untapped storehouse of skills from which we can all benefit.

### KEY INITIATIVES:

- Scholarly and public research on disability and employment across international contexts
- Identification of emergent and promising practices for employers and policymakers
- Collaborating with other researchers in medicine, disability advocacy and, public policy
- Publication and dissemination of research results in the form of workshops, webinars articles, and interviews
- Certificated workshops, professional development courses, and customized trainings for companies, firms, educational institutions, organizations, and advocacy networks
- Policy recommendations for both private and public sector employers
- Production of Broadcastability, a bilingual podcast by, for, and about people with disabilities.

PROUD offers sliding scale rates for disability support networks. Contact us at [info@theproudproject.ca](mailto:info@theproudproject.ca) or +1 (437) 993-9774.

## Current Projects

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### 1. Analysis and Dissemination of Data of from the Phenomenological Study of Disability and Employment in Five Countries

This landmark multi-year study explores how individuals and organizations successfully hire and integrate people with physical disabilities across five countries: Canada, USA, United Kingdom, France, and Belgium. By taking a multi-country approach, we were able to compare the lived experiences of disabled employees under a variety of liberal democratic regimes and in countries which all espoused the need for employment equity and human rights.

#### APPROACH

Our research team conducted in-depth 1-hour interviews in English, French and sign language with disabled employees and entrepreneurs, and employers who hire disabled people. Two members of the research team were present for each interview and interviewers carried out a total of 88 interviews with participants from Canada, USA, United Kingdom, France and Belgium. The team transcribed each interview into both English and French and conducted a qualitative analysis to identify key themes.

#### KEY OUTCOMES

Rich qualitative data emerged out of the study and has led to some surprising results. We learned that:

- The enforcement of employment equity policies and law means that employers are more willing to consider and hire disabled individuals
- Financial stability creates a base from which disabled persons can launch themselves into the job market. Lack of economic stability means that disabled persons tend not to risk entering the workforce
- Employers are pleasantly surprised by the productivity of disabled workers and bemoaned the fact that colleagues and middle managers were sometimes unreceptive to the contributions of their disabled peers.

#### PUBLICATION

A meta summary article (8,000 words) of findings is under peer review by the journal Disability and Society.

## 2. Mapping Intersectional Access: The Accessible Mapping Project

PROUD is revising the prosaic understanding of “accessibility” to go beyond identification of accessible entrances and washrooms. Using the disability experience of the PROUD team means that we view access in a much more nuanced and granular manner to provide users with a layered approach to accessibility mapping. PROUD knows that what may work for one individual may not work and can be a barrier for another. For example, one individual may need to know details about the slant of a pathway which can be advantageous but may be a barrier to another person. We know that disabled individuals have unique needs for information based on his/her/their own particular circumstance.

### APPROACH

In collaboration with the Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy at the University of Toronto, PROUD provided a unique clinical training project with Occupational Therapy students to create an industry-leading interactive digital map identifying accessibility features of built environments in a specific community. This pilot project centred around the needs of the disabled 2SLGBTQAI+ community, and thus provided a granular accessibility mapping tool to navigate Toronto’s Queer Village (Church and Wellesley).

A team of 8 Occupational therapy students developed a data collection tool to conduct detailed surveys of spaces capturing details which can be facilitators and/ or barriers for disabled individuals depending on their own needs. The students loaded the data including photographs on a mapping software hosted on ArcGIS which generates an interactive map. This prototype demonstrates how mapping software can make it possible for people to pre-plan their outings by having access to information currently not easily available. Features included such as:

- Physical distance measurements
- Entrance accessibility features (ramp detail, doorway width, door weight, automatic entry, alternate entryway options)
- Location of rest stop options (benches, seating)
- Location of emergency features (AED, Naloxone kit)
- Washroom location & features (stalls, privacy options, alternates to fully accessible washrooms)
- Sensory features (lighting, sound, high and low use times).

### OUTCOMES

Deliverables included:

- A map including several local businesses, library, community centre, public spaces
- Replicable mapping protocol
- Training manual that can be applied to any large campus, office, park, or neighbourhood in Canada and beyond.

### 3. Anti-Ableism and Health Equity Research

Dr. Chloë Atkins continues her ongoing research collaboration with Dr. Sunit Das (Neurosurgery, Unity Health Toronto) on anti-ableism in medicine and health equity. This work includes critical analyses of clinical triage frameworks, the clinical gaze, disability ethics, and Canada's Medical Assistance in Dying (MAID) program. Articles from this program of research have appeared in leading journals including *Chest*, the *American Journal of Bioethics*, and the *AMA Journal of Ethics*.

### 4. Broadcastability Podcast—Season 3: Research and Disability

Broadcastability, PROUD's award-eligible podcast by, for, and about disabled workers, launched its third season in July 2025. Season 3, titled "Research and Disability," features wide-ranging conversations with artists, clinicians, activists, and academics. Hosts Chloë Atkins, Lark Huska, and Zephyr Atkins-Mitra bring their signature warmth, rigour, and commitment to disability justice to each episode.

Season 3 Episodes (to date):

- Episode 1: Season 3 Opener: Checking in with Four PROUD Researchers (July 2025)
- Episode 2: Eliza Chandler: Exploring the Relationship Between Art, Disability, and Social Justice (September 2025)
- Episode 3: Myriam Winance: Les Ontologies et l'expérience vécue du handicap (October 2025) [en Français]
- Episode 4: Drs H. Atkins, C. Rush & S. Thyagu: A Conversation About Stem Cell Transplant for Autoimmune Disease (November 2025)
- Episode 5: Simo Vehmas: A Philosophical Chat about Language, Class, and Disability (February 2026)

Broadcastability is available on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and at [www.broadcastability.ca](http://www.broadcastability.ca).

### 5. Ongoing Scholarly Work

1. Country-based articles outlining lessons from 5 country study of disability employment
2. Monograph: *Disability and Vulnerability: A Historical Memoir*
  - Dr. Atkins is writing a monograph exploring vulnerability and disability in Canadian (French, English, and Indigenous) families since 1600.
3. PhD Dissertation:
  - "Embodying Invaliditet: Living (with) Disability in Habsburg-Administered Bosnia-Herzegovina and Independent Serbia, 1878–1914" Isabelle Avakumovic-Pointon (University of British Columbia).

# Research Outcomes 2024–2025

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## Scholarly Publications

### Articles

1. Chloe G K Atkins and Isabelle Avakumovic -Pointon. (2025). “Enabling Employment: A Summary of Findings from a Qualitative Study on Disability and Employment in Canada, United States, United Kingdom, France and Belgium.” **Disability and Society**, under review.
2. Atkins, C. G. K. (2025). “Disability Ethics is for Everyone.” **Health Ethics Today** 32, no. 1 (June): 5–7.
3. Atkins, C. G. K. et al. (2025). “Disability Ethics in Medicine.” **The Palgrave Encyclopaedia of Disability** (May).
4. Atkins, C. G. K. and Sunit Das. (2024). “COUNTERPOINT: Is It Ethically Permissible to Use Frailty Scoring to Determine the Allocation of Medical Resources Under Conditions of Scarcity in the Medical ICU? No.” **CHEST** 166, no. 2 (August): 252–254.

### Book Chapters

- Atkins, C. G. K. and Sunit Das. “The Uncertain Body: Knowledge, Power and the Problem of Medically Unexplained Symptoms (MUPS).” In **The Disability Bioethics Reader**, Routledge 2027, forthcoming.
- Atkins, C. G. K. and Sunit Das. “A Medico-Political Analysis of the SARS CoV2 Pandemic.” University of Manitoba Press, forthcoming.
- Atkins, C. G. K. “Questionable Refuge.” In *Disabled Faculty and Staff in Higher Education: Intersecting Identities and Everyday Experience*. AHEAD, 2023.

### Presentations

- Atkins, C. G. K. “Chronic Illness, Communication & Consent.” Dossetor Health Ethics Centre, January 2026.
- Atkins, C. G. K. Panelist: “Medical Assistance in Dying and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.” McGill Faculty of Law – CHRLP Disability Initiative, November 2024.
- Atkins, C. G. K. “Making Livelihoods in Disabling Contexts: Canada, US, UK, France and Belgium.” Disability and Work in Canada Conference, Ottawa, November 2023.
- Atkins, C. G. K. and Avakumovic-Pointon, I. “Ecosystems and Expectations.” Live Work Well Research Centre, University of Guelph, August 2023.

### Media Coverage

- Hawk, A. Interviewed by CBC’s Ramraajh Sharvendiran on the queer history of Halloween in Toronto. CBC, October 31, 2024.

- Atkins, C. G. K. Quoted in “The Millions of People Stuck in Pandemic Limbo.” The Atlantic, February 2022.

## **Non-Scholarly Publications**

- Atkins, C. G. K. and Avakumovic-Pointon, I. “How employers can tackle misconceptions about disabled people in the workplace.” The Conversation, October 9, 2023.

# 2024–2025 PROUD Fellowship Recipients

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The PROUD Fellowship supports emerging scholars whose research advances disability justice, equity, and inclusion. We are delighted to celebrate our 2024–2025 cohort of five exceptional fellows:

## **Ness Maloney (they/them)**

*PhD Candidate, Socio-Cultural Anthropology, University of Toronto*

Research focus: Care economies, global disability experiences, critical disability studies, and feminist theories of care. Ness conducts ethnographic research with disabled self-advocates in the Cook Islands, New Zealand, and Tonga.

## **Walter Rafael Villanueva (he/him)**

*PhD Candidate, Department of English / Centre for Global Disability Studies / Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto*

Research focus: Asian Canadian narratives of madness; the intersection of psychiatric diagnosis, storytelling, and caregiving. Walter's activism centres anti-racism and de-stigmatizing mental illness.

## **Keegan James (he/they)**

*Master of Information Student, Faculty of Information, University of Toronto*

Research focus: 2S-LGBTQ+ inclusion and community archiving. Keegan has over a decade of Pride organizing experience and co-founded the In Love and Leather Community Archive. Currently serves as Centre Coordinator, Centre for Global Disability Studies.

## **Kayla Saunders (she/her)**

*Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) Student, University of Toronto*

Research focus: Disability justice in library and information science; functional seizures and equitable scholarship. Recipient of York University's Dean's Award for Research Excellence (2022).

## **Matthew Palynchuk (he/him)**

*PhD Candidate, Political Theory, University of Toronto*

Research focus: Disability, social movements, and egalitarian justice. Published in *Social Theory and Practice*, *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, and *Journal of Moral Philosophy*.

## Past Projects & Milestones

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### **Disability Policy Country Reports**

PROUD produced comprehensive reports on the current disability employment policies in five countries: Canada, France, Belgium, the United States, and the United Kingdom. These reports formed the policy foundation for our ongoing multi-country qualitative study and have been shared with researchers, policymakers, and advocacy organizations.

### ***Broadcastability Seasons 1 & 2***

Season 1 (2021–2022): “The Experiences of Successful, Disabled, Canadian Employees and Entrepreneurs.” Hosted by Dr. Chloë Atkins and Andrea Whiteley, the 8-episode debut season explored how people with disabilities navigate workplace barriers and find success. PROUD partnered with Easter Seals Canada under their Reimagine Employability Initiative for this season.

Season 2 (2023–2025): “The Experiences of Disabled Employees and Entrepreneurs in France, Belgium, the UK, and the USA.” Hosted by Dr. Chloë Atkins and Isabelle Avakumovic-Pointon, this season expanded PROUD’s international reach, featuring voices from across four countries.

### **Bibliometric Literature Review**

Chloë Atkins, Andrea Whiteley, and Brenna Leslie conducted a quantitative review of more than 1,500 publications on disability and employment. The research revealed important gaps in existing bibliometric tools — notably that Web of Science inadequately captures disability studies scholarship published in books. These findings were presented at the Critical Digital Humanities International Conference (2022) and the Pacific Rim International Conference on Disability and Diversity (2022).

## Looking Ahead: 2025–2026

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We acknowledge that with the demise of USAID, the international funding environment is very competitive. Moreover, the Canadian federal government has cut spending across all departments by 15% which also means that funds supporting our work have significantly shrunk. PROUD welcomes private donor funding as it can be leveraged into more money when we engage with salary reimbursement programs run by government agencies such as

TechNation. Private sector or philanthropic donations give PROUD the flexibility to maintain its high calibre research and advocacy.

Nonetheless, as we look to the year ahead, The PROUD Project is committed to:

- Publishing country specific articles (in both English and French) about our landmark five-country study on disability and employment
- Collaborating with the University of Toronto's Faculty of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy in launching a NEW Accessible Mapping Project of the University of Toronto's St George campus
- Continuing Broadcastability production: "Research and Disability"
- Putting together a 4–5-member international consortium to undertake a project arising out of our five-country study. The project focuses on changing attitudes about disability in the workplace
- We will apply (Sept 2026) to Horizon Europe an agency of the European Union.
- Expanding our professional development and training offerings for employers and institutions
- Growing the PROUD Fellowship program to support more emerging disability scholars
- Deepening partnerships with disability organizations, health institutions, and policy bodies across Canada and internationally.

We believe that when research is led by disabled people, and when its findings reach those who can act on them; real and lasting change is possible. Thank you for being part of that change.

# Our Team

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## Board of Directors

- Chloë G. K. Atkins: Board Chair
- Zephyr Mitra: Secretary of the Board
- Bonnie Severin, CPA/CA: Board Treasurer (40+ years in finance and taxation; former senior management, multinational financial sector)
- Negar Hashemi: Board Member (lawyer and advocate; former President, Iranian Women's Organization of Ontario)
- Ashley Bristowe: Board Member (author and disability advocate, Nova Scotia).

## Leadership

### Chloë G. K. Atkins, PhD: Co-Executive Director & Board Chair

Dr. Atkins holds a status-only position in the Department of Political Science at the University of Toronto Scarborough and a postdoctorate from Cornell University Law School. She publishes widely on disability, bioethics, health equity, anti-ableism, human rights, and narrative scholarship. Author of *My Imaginary Illness* (Cornell University Press, 2010), awarded the American Journal of Nursing Book of the Year (2011). Dr. Atkins is a recipient of Killam, Clarke, Fulbright, and SSHRC Fellowships.

### Aruna L. Mitra, BScOT, MEd: Co-Executive Director

Ms. Mitra holds a status-only position in the Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy at the University of Toronto. She brings extensive professional and leadership experience providing healthcare for people with disabilities and those requiring long-term care across Ontario and Alberta. She has worked across private, government, and non-profit sectors and has contributed to policy development and professional ethics education in healthcare across Canada. Aruna is a peer surveyor for Accreditation Canada which works with governments, regional health authorities, hospitals, long term care and community-based programs and services in both private and public sectors to meet quality standards.

## Research

### Isabelle Avakumovic-Pointon, MA — Research Associate

Incoming PhD student at the University of British Columbia (History). Her research examines the experiences of disabled people in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Balkans.

### Charlotte Flameng — Research Assistant

Bilingual (English/French) research assistant. Holds a BSc in Psychology and a Master's in Neuropsychology from Brussels, Belgium. She has worked in mental health and social services with vulnerable populations in Canada for eight years.

## Communications & Administration

### Lark Huska — Social Media and Communications Officer

Undergraduate student at the University of Toronto (Diasporas and Transnational Studies, Political Science, Visual Studies). Co-host of Broadcastability Season 3.

## Former Team Members

We acknowledge and thank former PROUD Project team members: Andrea Whiteley, Brenna Leslie, Ahad Alingary, Caroline Casinelli, Rachel Desborough, Keegan James, and A. Atticus Hawk.

## Funders & Partners

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The PROUD Project is made possible by the generous support of our funding partners and private donors. We extend our sincere gratitude to:

- University of Toronto Scarborough
- Department of Political Science (UTSC)
- Centre for Global Disability Studies, University of Toronto
- Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC)
- Government of Canada
- TechNation: Career Ready Program
- BMO Nesbitt Burns
- Private Donors

### Support PROUD

Your donation directly funds disability-led research, advocacy, and community engagement. Every contribution — large or small — makes a difference.

Donations to The PROUD Project are eligible for a Canadian or U.S. charitable donation tax credit. PROUD is a CRA Registered Charity.

**Donate: [donate@theproudproject.ca](mailto:donate@theproudproject.ca) | [www.theproudproject.ca](http://www.theproudproject.ca)**

# Contact Us

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## Podcast

[www.broadcastability.ca](http://www.broadcastability.ca)

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