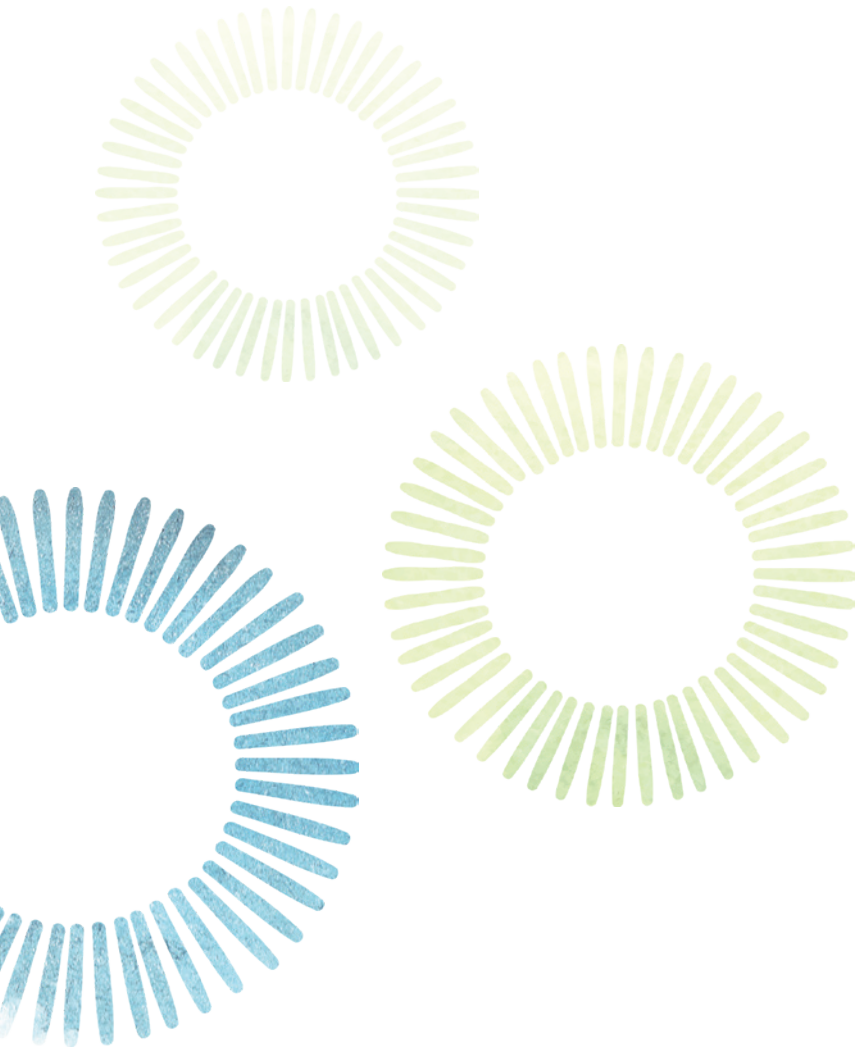




Indigenous Perspectives on Higher Education



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Executive Summary

Purpose of the Circle

The purpose of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO (CCUNESCO) Virtual Circle on Indigenous Perspectives on Higher Education was to inform discussions at the UNESCO World Higher Education Conference in May 2022 and produce a supporting policy paper. It has been 10 years since the last meeting of this type. CCUNESCO believes it is important to bring a diversity of voices to the table for consideration by UNESCO. The goal is to deconstruct a system that has been constructed narrowly—as a closed system—to include and place Indigenous knowledge systems within it through co-creation.

Indigenous Circle format

Despite its virtual format, the webinar adhered to Indigenous protocols, opening and closing with prayers, songs and welcomes from respected Elders and Knowledge Keepers. The format emulated a Talking Circle that encourages respect, information-sharing, attentiveness and interconnectedness.

Key messages

- The starting point for the consultation was that higher education in its current format emerged from a narrow settlers' perspective and continues to largely exclude the perspectives and ways of knowing of Indigenous Peoples, to its own detriment and theirs.
- To favour the well-being of all people inclusively and the sustainability of societies overall, higher education systems must be deconstructed and co-created into new structures that respect and incorporate Indigenous knowledge and values. They should be redesigned to feel inclusive to Indigenous students and should explore what Indigenous wisdom and culture—developed over millennia—can offer humankind rather than expecting students to conform to existing norms.
- A better structure for higher education would focus on accessibility, inclusiveness and respect for Indigenous ways of knowing. This should be validated and incorporated into curricula. Higher education should also evolve to include Indigenous methods of knowledge acquisition, such as land-based education. By improving equity, decolonizing knowledge, opening science, reducing or eliminating racism, and offering robust and culturally attuned supports to students to ensure they complete their studies, Indigenous higher education models can support the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Participants in Speaking Order

Bob Watts (Moderator) Professor Emeritus, University of Victoria, Canada

Isabelle LeVert-Chiasson Education Program Officer, Canadian Commission for UNESCO

Dr. Budd Hall Professor Emeritus, University of Victoria, Canada

Dr. Lorna Wanostsa'a7 Williams Professor Emerita, University of Victoria, Canada

Stephen Augustine Associate Vice President, Indigenous Affairs and Unama'ki College, Nova Scotia, Canada

Dr. Elmer Guy Co-Chair, World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium and President, Navajo Technical University, United States

Dr. Rongo H. Wetere Vice-Chancellor, World Indigenous Nations University, New Zealand

Dr. Sherri Chisan President, University nuxelhot'ine thaa ehots'í nistameyimâkanak Blue Quills, Canada

Dr. Robina Thomas Associate Professor, Vice President Indigenous, University of Victoria, Canada

Dr. Stephanie Roy President, Kenjgwein Teg, Ontario, Canada

Miranda Huron Director of Indigenous Education and Affairs, Capilano University, Canada

Dr. Airini Provost and Vice-President Academic, University of Saskatchewan, Canada

Laurie Robinson Executive Director, Indigenous Advanced Education and Skills Council, Canada

Sheldon Levy Interim President and Vice-Chancellor of University Canada West, Canada

Brent Tookenay Chief Executive Officer, Seven Generation Education Institute, Ontario, Canada

Dr. Élisabeth Kaine Professor, University of Quebec in Chicoutimi, Canada

Dr. Wesley Leonard Assistant Professor, University of California, United States

Dr. Megan Lukaniec Assistant Professor, Indigenous Studies, University of Victoria, Canada

Chuutsqa Layla Rorick University of Victoria, Canada

Vanessa Chaperlin Senior Policy Advisor, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, Canada

Arnold Blackstar Director of Strategic Policy and Research, Indigenous Advanced Education and Skills Council, Canada

Problems and solutions

Overall, Circle participants noted that while Indigenous higher education institutions in some parts of Canada have made significant progress in recent decades, particularly in terms of recognition and accreditation, those in other Canadian provinces and around the world still need help to develop and to close significant equity gaps. The participants identified gaps and challenges related to:

- Equity, colonization and racism
- Partnerships and bridging
- Indigenous language fluency
- Data for evidence-informed leadership
- Presence of Indigenous faculty and leadership
- Accreditation
- Support for Indigenous students

To address these gaps and challenges, participants proposed and discussed the following solutions:

- Higher education should incorporate Indigenous perspectives and contexts and support Indigenous languages.
- There is a need to build bridges between Indigenous ways of being and thinking and Western ways of gathering and processing knowledge by recognizing the differences between the two and appreciating the contributions of each.
- Indigenous institutes could welcome learners from other cultures.

- There is a need to better prepare teachers and provide more opportunities for education, and as we develop these programs, we must incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing, thought and practice.
- Indigenous science needs to be recognized for its role in protecting and respecting place and ensuring that life on Earth remains sustainable over time.
- Indigenous languages must be revitalized in communities.
- Indigenous students and faculty need to see others who look and think like them in their post-secondary institutions.
- Indigenous institutes should be sanctuaries where learners can come for rejuvenation and encouragement. They should be places of language revitalization, community engagement, inclusiveness and accessibility.

For more information

The following report contains half-page summaries of each speaker's key points. These are condensed, paraphrased and edited from the webinar, and seek to convey the essence of each speaker's message.

Full report: Indigenous Perspectives on Higher Education



Purpose

The purpose of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO (CCUNESCO) Virtual Circle on Indigenous Perspectives on Higher Education was to inform discussions at the UNESCO World Higher Education Conference in May 2022 and produce a supporting policy paper. It has been 10 years since the last meeting of this type. CCUNESCO believes it is important to bring a diversity of voices to the table for consideration by UNESCO. As participant Dr. Lorna Wanostsa'a7 Williams Professor Emerita, University of Victoria, Canada, phrased it, "Higher education is an extremely important structure for us to open." The goal is to deconstruct a system that has been constructed narrowly—as a closed system—to include and place Indigenous knowledge systems within it through co-creation.

Indigenous Circle format

Despite its virtual format, the webinar adhered to Indigenous protocols, opening and closing with prayers, songs and welcomes from respected Elders and Knowledge Keepers. The format emulated a Talking Circle that encourages respect, information sharing, attentiveness and interconnectedness.

Key messages

The starting point for the consultation was that higher education in its current format emerged from a narrow settlers' perspective and continues to largely exclude the perspectives and ways of knowing of Indigenous Peoples, to its own detriment and theirs.

To favour the well-being of all people inclusively and the sustainability of societies overall, higher education systems must be deconstructed and co-created—with Indigenous post-secondary institutions as leaders, ensuring accountability to Indigenous nations, knowledge, and languages—into new

structures that respect and incorporate Indigenous knowledge and values. They should be redesigned to feel inclusive to Indigenous students. Rather than expecting students to conform to existing norms, they should explore what Indigenous wisdom and culture, developed over millennia, can offer humankind.

By changing to be more appreciative of students from more backgrounds and cultures, public universities will retain more of those students and, in so doing, help them to achieve higher education, equity and a means of both contributing to and sharing in the socio-economic benefits of our societies.

A better structure for higher education would focus on accessibility, inclusiveness and respect for Indigenous ways of knowing. This should be validated and incorporated into curricula in recognition of the fact that, as currently practiced, Western science has often proven more harmful than beneficial to sustainability. Higher education should also evolve to include Indigenous methods of knowledge acquisition, such as land-based education. These knowledge systems and methods can benefit and help preserve the world's ecosystems and biospheres to ensure they remain habitable to humans for generations to come.

By improving equity, decolonizing knowledge, opening science, reducing or eliminating racism, and offering robust and culturally attuned supports to students to ensure they complete their studies, Indigenous higher education models support the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Indigenous-led higher education institutions and models should receive funding that is equal to that given to public institutions along with support for accreditation of their programs and educational designations. Consideration should also be given to building bridges between Indigenous and Western educational models and institutions for the benefit of both.

Problems and solutions

Overall, Circle participants noted that while Indigenous higher education institutions in some parts of Canada have made significant progress in recent decades, particularly in terms of recognition and accreditation, those in other Canadian provinces and around the world still need help to develop and to close significant equity gaps. They identified challenges and problems in the areas outlined below.

Equity, colonization and racism

Key challenges were identified in the areas of equity, colonization and racism. Participants noted that deeper discussions need to take place on these topics because while the conversations are critical, they are currently far too superficial. As one speaker noted, words like “Indigenization” and “decolonization” can be added to every document, but they are not useful unless deep thought has gone into the concepts and it’s clear what they mean, why they’re important, and how these processes will actually work in practice. Most higher education institutions have not yet stepped beyond the jargon to apply critical thought, deeper meaning and follow-up action to terms like these.

Partnerships and bridging

Another identified gap focused on the need to validate Indigenous knowledge in post-secondary education. Participants discussed the requirement for partnerships and bridging between public institutions and Indigenous ones to secure the validation and recognition of Indigenous knowledge in both.

Indigenous language fluency

The above challenges are intertwined with another significant gap: Indigenous language fluency. Participants noted that because Indigenous knowledge is coded within Indigenous languages, language is a cornerstone of education. Greater equality between colonial languages (like English and French) and Indigenous languages is needed along with higher numbers of Indigenous teachers who are truly proficient speakers. This, in turn, speaks to the need to revitalize and reclaim Indigenous languages and to create pathways and programs for learning them so more people can become fluent.

Data for evidence-informed leadership

Participants also spoke of the need to explore the role of data as well as its connection to equity and evidence-informed leadership for parity and Indigenous outcomes in higher education. Data can support a call for public education institutions to work harder to lift Indigenous participation, retention and outcomes at both the undergraduate and graduate levels and, in so doing, grow the Indigenous higher-education workforce and develop Indigenous leaders in academia. The goal is to intentionally develop Indigenous researchers who can design and lead research for and by Indigenous communities and demonstrate how Indigenous knowledge-making is world-class, employing authentic Indigenous research methodologies.

More Indigenous faculty and leadership

A related leadership concern is about the low number of Indigenous faculty members at public higher-education institutions. To literally change the face of higher education, there is a need to move beyond assuming that having a single Indigenous person on staff is sufficient. This need is connected to the requirement for better support to retain existing Indigenous faculty members. Universities should put mechanisms in place to recognize the unique responsibilities that Indigenous faculty members have to their communities and support them in carrying these out. As noted earlier, statements are not enough: structural change with specific mechanisms in place are needed. It’s critical to have Indigenous faculty and staff to lead, shape and govern these programs and ensure the cultural safety of students.

Accreditation

Another gap identified relates to accreditation: the need for Indigenous higher education institutions to have their own recognized programming, degrees and diplomas. This entails validating programs, recognizing the importance and value of Indigenous knowledge systems, providing sufficient funding, and developing mechanisms by which Indigenous entities can review and accredit any Indigenous knowledge or language programming in public or private institutions. In most provinces, one of the greatest inequities that exists between public and Indigenous institutes is funding: where Indigenous institutes are treated similarly to private colleges, they receive only 5 to 25 percent of what public institutions do.

Support for Indigenous students

Finally, there is a gap when it comes to Indigenous students' sense of value to the world: participants noted that it is important for Indigenous young people to feel that they are important for humanity and that their knowledge and communities are scientifically valid and needed. However, the chain of knowledge transmission is currently broken. To repair it—and to ensure future Indigenous leadership in research and education—more Indigenous people must be part of higher-education institutions, and Indigenous institutes must be properly resourced. Achieving this will involve educating greater numbers of Indigenous people at the post-secondary level, recruiting them as faculty in universities, and retaining them.

The above challenge speaks to a final underlying one: ensuring more Indigenous people attend post-secondary education in the first place and stay for the duration. This means putting more robust student supports in place. Supporting Indigenous students (who must often travel to a different part of the country and a completely new environment and culture to pursue their studies) looks completely different from supporting non-Indigenous students.

To address the gaps and challenges listed above, Circle participants suggested the following solutions.

1. Higher education should **incorporate Indigenous perspectives and contexts and support Indigenous languages**. Curricula should be Indigenized. A starting point would be to bring in Elders, Chiefs, education directors and others who work in higher education to collaborate with faculty and develop better pedagogy, provided that it is authenticated or accredited by Indigenous entities.
2. We need to **build bridges between Indigenous ways of being and thinking and Western ways of gathering and processing knowledge** by recognizing the differences between the two and appreciating the contributions of each. In a deeper sense, we need to build up Indigenous culture and languages to offer an important sustainability arc to Western science and culture. Part of this solution needs to be validation and accreditation of programs and degrees to provide assurance. Related, non-Indigenous institutes need to work with or alongside Indigenous post-secondary institutes to ensure the latter have a role, visibility and influence and can take responsibility for the education of Indigenous people.
3. **Indigenous institutes could welcome learners from other cultures**: Part of the path forward is for people to come to Indigenous places of learning (to learn Indigenous ways of knowing) rather than expecting Indigenous teachers to go to their places.
4. Related, we need to **better prepare teachers and provide more opportunities for education**, and as we develop these programs, we must incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing, thought and practice. We further need to recognize that Western science does not work outside of time, and can create harmful products and practices. We need more Indigenous people in the science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields to provide leadership and to advise on what is safe.
5. **Indigenous science needs to be recognized** for its role in protecting and respecting place and ensuring that life on Earth remains sustainable over time. For this to happen, we further need to recognize that Indigenous ways of knowing are learned not in classrooms, but on the land, and we need to find a way to bring this awareness and practice to the level of higher education. Related, we need to develop an intellectual property policy to protect Indigenous knowledge and ideas.
6. **Indigenous languages must be revitalized** in communities. For this to happen, more people who are fluent in these languages must be present and willing to teach them in communities, and curricula must be developed that can be easily administered by people who, while being fluent speakers themselves, may not have prior teaching experience. There is also a need to develop curricula that are properly accredited, delivered, accountable and publicly funded.
7. **Indigenous students and faculty need to see others who look and think like them** in their post-secondary institutions. That said, for Indigenous people in large public institutions, there is a need to thoroughly consider how to maintain Indigenous ways of knowing, thinking and understanding the world.
8. **Indigenous institutes should be sanctuaries** where learners can come for rejuvenation and encouragement. They should be places of language revitalization, community engagement, research, inclusiveness and accessibility. For this to happen, institutions must be able to go beyond simply requesting “space in the academy” and begin instead to define that space.

Speaker summaries

The following summaries are paraphrased and condensed from the webinar and seek to convey the essence of what each speaker said. The summaries below are shown in the order in which participants spoke.

Words of welcome

Dr. Budd Hall

UNESCO Co-Chair, Community-Based Research
and Social Responsibility in Higher Education
Professor Emeritus, University of Victoria School of Public Administration

The UNESCO Chair is a joint partnership between the University of Victoria and the Society for Participatory Research in Asia located in New Delhi, India. The objective of the Chair is to build research capacity in the global South and the excluded North in the field of community-based research. It does this through collaboration with many global networks, advocacy work with governments and funding bodies, and training.

Rajesh Tandon (my co-chair) and I have been working with Dr. Lorna Wanjira Williams on the issues around knowledge, democracy, social responsibility and the decolonization of higher education. We have worked together on contributions to the Open Science Recommendation, which UNESCO will be ratifying, and have been successful in achieving recognition that Indigenous ways of knowing are critical to any perspective of opening up science. We promise to carry the message that comes out of today's conversation to the World Conference on Higher Education in Barcelona in 2022.

Dr. Lorna Wanostsa'a7 Williams

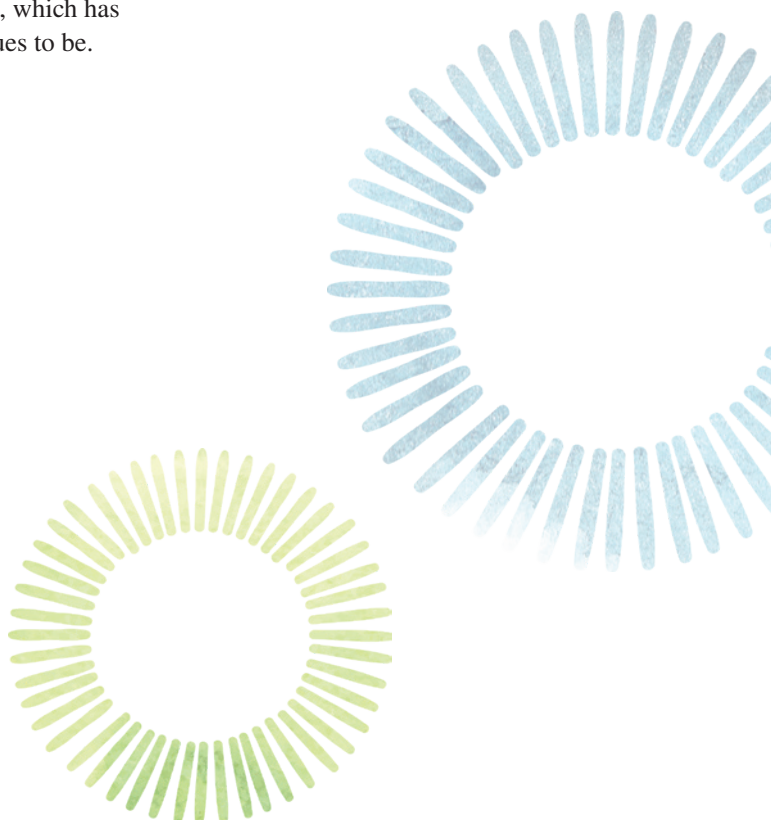
Professor Emerita, University of Victoria, Canada

Higher education is an extremely important structure for us to open. We're trying to deconstruct what has been constructed from a very narrow perspective and include our knowledge systems into a new co-created structure.

For those who are shaping this, your voices are critical to determining the direction in which Indigenous higher education will take us. Our people on all of our homelands—whether they live and reside in our homelands or are away from home—need those opportunities. Those of you who are working from within the structure to make changes, your voices are extremely important. This work is challenging. You're pushing a boulder up a hill.

A few years ago, the Province of Ontario (Canada) created the Indigenous Institute Act enabling Indigenous institutes to grant degrees. This has been a big step. I want you to hear about what people are doing with this idea. And so we're having this virtual circle in the way of Indigenous people around the world. When we gather to problem-solve, to try to achieve goals, to figure things out, to plan to work together, we have a conversation, and usually we put the problem, or the work we are gathered to do, in the centre, and we speak to that centre. We mold and shape what we're working on. I've found this to be an important process: it keeps us from arguing because we've committed to build and work together. And today, what we're trying to shape in the centre is higher education. We're trying to open higher education, which has been a closed system from the very beginning, and continues to be.

“
One of the areas that I've been working on is Indigenous languages across Canada, in the United States, and around the world. We're all in the same place in this work. At the present moment, there is no place in higher education for this.”



Indigenizing the curriculum

Stephen Augustine

Associate Vice President, Indigenous Affairs and Unama'ki College, Nova Scotia

My college is involved in teaching Mi'kmaq languages and developing learning in community, such as by providing courses in communities. We have a history of providing that service to at least 10 Indigenous communities in the Maritimes, especially the larger ones that can accommodate a sizeable enough student body. In 1999, we started with about 15 people, and since then we have hit upwards of 325.

I've taught about pre-contact Mi'kmaq life, creation stories, ceremonies and spirituality, the meaning of those in our culture and our history. I've also taught about treaties from an Indigenous perspective, how we make treaties with the birds, plants, animals and fish. My teaching always provides the Indigenous context.

I want to put together a research hub with a reach into the four schools at the university: the School of Arts and Social Sciences, Science and Technology, Health and Education, and Business—including the Dean of Library and Dean of Research and Graduate Studies. Those are the six areas where I want to harness and develop a research hub where we look into Indigenizing curriculum at the university. We want to help faculty come together and share their ideas, and bring in people from the community: the Elders, the Chiefs, education directors, the people who work in Unama'ki College the faculty who develop and improve pedagogy.

“

Working from the inside is really like pushing that stone uphill (as Lorna Williams described). When you stop to rest, the stone rolls away and you have to go back down and start pushing it up again. We see this with when administrators, teams, chairs and academic vice-presidents are replaced. So often the slate gets pushed aside and the rock rolls back. We have to reposition ourselves and repurpose the proposals we have put forward.”

Accreditation

Dr. Elmer Guy

Co-Chair, World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium,
President, Navajo Technical University, United States

The work of the World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium (WINHEC) is very important when it comes to addressing the barriers that impede respectful engagement of Indigenous Peoples and teaching, research, and other endeavours in education. Looking at the future, I think in one sense, we need to build bridges between Native ways of being and thinking and Western ways of building up and processing knowledge by clearly recognizing the differences between the two. And in a deeper sense, we need to build up our Native culture and languages to give an important sustainability arc to Western science and culture.

In WINHEC, we have a Board of Accreditation with authority to build Native culture and language into the heart of our educational process and practice. I think all Tribal colleges and many of the public colleges as well as other higher education institutions ought to develop programs that take advantage of WINHEC's accreditation structure. Today we have 16 higher education institutions accredited, and several more are in the process of being accredited. The work they're doing is being validated by the Board of Accreditation, which assures the public of the quality and integrity of the services rendered.

Revitalizing Indigenous languages

Dr. Rongo H. Wetere

Vice-chancellor, World Indigenous Nations University & Founder,
Te Wananga o Aotearoa, New Zealand

Language revitalization is what we're known for in New Zealand. The Maori language was dying back in the 1980s and 1990s, and I made a commitment to change that. Over the last two decades, we have taught thousands of Maori and non-Maori people to speak Te Reo Maori. We've developed a methodology that uses accelerated learning techniques to help assimilate language much more quickly versus just sitting in a class. We've had two and a half decades of experience now, and have put thousands of people through the process. This is a methodology that can easily be developed for Indigenous people, and we've been invited to Canada to do exactly that. We're now working on three languages here: Cree, Oji-Cree and Ojibwe.

I hope the Canadian government honours the commitment it has made to revitalize Indigenous languages. We need to have approved courses that have been properly accredited and that are accountable and state-funded.

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We need more Natives in STEM fields. Our students need science and technology to achieve high-paying jobs. But in the end, Western science does not work outside of time. It creates products that are harmful or harming the human race and the interrelatedness of life as we speak.”

“

We must have fluent-speaking community people who don't need to have spent years in universities learning how to teach. We need to develop curricula that are easily administered by people who may have no teaching experience, but know the language.”

Visibility, autonomy and funding

Dr. Sherri Chisan

President, University nuxelhot'ine thaa?ehots'ı nistameyimâkanak
Blue Quills, Canada

We appreciate the hard work that went into preparing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. I think one of my main hesitations with it is that the section on post-secondary education contains no mention of the requirement to work with or alongside First Nations post-secondary institutions or to have any role for our own institutions. It's like we don't exist in these lands, our lands.

Blue Quills is independently owned and governed by seven First Nations. We get our most important accreditation from our people. So, we don't seek permission. We act with confidence and trust. We have our own masters' and doctoral degrees, and we set these up without asking the permission of the academy. Even so, the academy is hiring our graduates and allowing them into their programs.

But we are funded at somewhere between 5 and 25 percent of what public institutions in our region receive. We are doing a lot more than they can in a lot of ways, and it would sure be nice to have the other 95 or 75 cents. So that's one of my main challenges as President at Blue Quills: how do we turn that model on its head without compromising, surrendering, sharing our jurisdiction? That's been huge for us as Treaty People. We're a Treaty Protection Site, and we don't see how we can continue to protect the Treaty if we allow another jurisdiction to legislate us. You know, as a people, we've experienced appropriation, misinterpretation, benevolence and supremacism.

“ We are following the vision and determination of our ancestors, who said we can and must be responsible for educating our own people. We welcome learners from other cultures, those who have come to share our lands. I think part of the path forward is that people need to come to our places of learning to learn directly from us, rather than expecting that we go to their places of learning.”

Language revitalization

Dr. Robina Thomas

Associate Professor, Vice President, Indigenous, University of Victoria, Canada

I'm thinking today about language revitalization in particular—along with community engagement, accessibility and accreditation. All of those things that make language revitalization more accessible to everybody.

I recently took a three-week immersion program in the Halkomelem language. It was the hardest course I've ever taken, despite all my time in post-secondary institutions, and probably also the most meaningful. And for the first time, I deeply understood the concern of the Elders in my community about what will happen if we lose our language. I've often been that irritating niece, granddaughter or daughter asking, "How do you say this?" or "How do you say that?" and trying to understand. So many times, I've had Elders say, "That's really hard to translate, but here's the closest meaning."

As a leader, I feel it's important to listen twice as much as I speak—as the Elders tell us to do. That's why we have two ears and one mouth. And for me, a key challenge is to figure out how to listen with my heart, not just my head. I need to be able to listen and feel the passion and the commitment. And I need to be able to bring that passion and commitment into the work that I do, into supporting programs.

“

I think one of the most critical roles I have is to bring important messages forward. Years ago, I researched residential schools, and I struggled at the time to speak about what I was hearing and learning because I didn't go to residential school myself. At that time I had two mentors. And they said: You've been given those stories for a reason, and that's to speak for those who may not have a voice.”

Bridging Western and Indigenous ways of knowing

Dr. Stephanie Roy

President, Kenjgwein Teg, Ontario, Canada

I've been in higher education for almost 20 years. And what I've observed is that our impact as Indigenous institutes across this country is plentiful. I think it comes down to how we validate our ways of knowing. When we talk about Indigenous institutes working with public institutions, I think there is a bridging role that has to happen, especially as we move into really affirming our existence. I think we need to bridge those partnerships so Indigenous Knowledge is recognized in both systems.

I also think our programs cannot exist without Indigenous languages across this country. And what does that mean structurally? In my view, it means we have to be able to look at equity in the sense of languages. And to do that, you need to look at why inequities exist in the system. It's always about asking: What does decolonization mean within the institutions of higher learning? What does it mean for our own people?

I think in 30 years, if we're able to see changes in higher education, I'd love to see that our languages are thriving. One of the statistics given by UNESCO a number of years ago was that 30 percent of children need to learn those languages today for our languages to thrive across this country. And that's not happening. We're not even operating at 5 percent. So I think we really need to make a firm statement about Indigenous languages within our ways of knowing and being. And then we need to see how the system is going to support that throughout our higher education institutions.

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We need to be able to address equity, decolonization and racism—equity in the system and what it means to those of us working in Indigenous institutes. These critical conversations are still very surface-level. We haven't been able to really reach and dig deep to explore what structural inequity means.”



Authenticity and cultural engagement

Miranda Huron

Director of Indigenous Education and Affairs, Capilano University,
Canada

When I came to Capilano University, one of the things that I noticed was that words like Indigenization and decolonization were in every document, but nobody was really questioning what they meant. I think some of the work we're currently doing—which needs to be done in most post-secondary institutions—is about stepping beyond the jargon and taking the time for reflection and critical thought about what these spaces are.

As well, Capilano recently commissioned a canoe. I joked about it being like an unplanned pregnancy: they hadn't realized that it would come with a million cultural responsibilities. But it means we need to connect with the Nations and say, "Okay, we're now a canoe family. What does this mean? How does it impact the university's planning for the next 20 years? How do we integrate it into what we are as a university and what we stand for? How do we bring in that knowledge in a good way? How do you grow that knowledge with every new generation of students and faculty and staff?"

That's where we've been working, and it's really changed the way people think about engaging with culture. It's pushing us toward creating a space on campus for Skw'chays, the canoe, that also becomes a space of learning, collaboration and regrowth of lost knowledge.

“

How do you stay away from trying to make knowledge your property? Those conversations are very difficult because professors have autonomy over their knowledge. Once they're engaged, there's that question of creating a space that's respectful—but how do we ensure that if that professor goes on to another institution, the respect will remain intact?”

Use of data to demonstrate excellence in Indigenous research

Dr. Airini

Provost and Vice-President Academic, University of Saskatchewan,
Canada

There is a role for data in the quest for equity—for data and evidence-informed leadership to support parity and Indigenous outcomes in higher education. Given that we were the original scientists, and we continue that tradition, can we also claim the quantitative side in order to call public higher education institutions to account for lifting Indigenous participation, retention and outcomes at undergraduate and graduate levels?

That's related to the challenge of growing the Indigenous higher education workforce—the idea and practice of intentionally growing Indigenous researchers to design and lead research for and by Indigenous communities, to demonstrate how our research and knowledge-making are world-class. I headed up the Pacific Research Panel for New Zealand, and we were able to design it in a way that showed our work is world-class. This is related to developing greater—would the word be control?—of the ethics space around research, and developing Nation-specific and fully Indigenized approaches to research ethics and governance.

“
**I’m interested
in how we can go
about growing
Indigenous leaders
in higher education,
and I’m wondering
if this is actually
the beginning of a
World Indigenous
Higher Education
Leadership Circle.
Perhaps it is a chance
to be very intentional
about growing this
collective that we’re
embodying, virtually,
today.”**



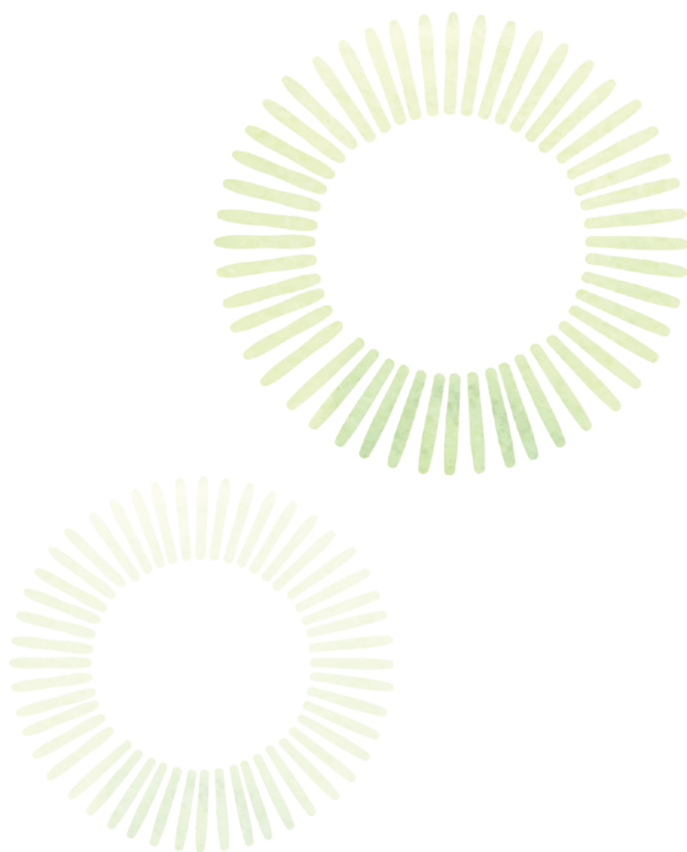
Legislation and quality assurance

Laurie Robinson

Executive Director, Indigenous Advanced Education and Skills Council,
Ontario, Canada

In the province of Ontario, the Indigenous Institutes Act was passed in 2017. That law was co-developed with Indigenous people. One of the important things the Act did was recognize nine Indigenous institutes for the purposes of funding. It also recognized that the highest-quality education was needed. Every First Nations leader associated with this development felt that without the highest-quality education, they weren't going to do this.

In essence, they said: to achieve the highest quality, we want a quality assurance body that is ours, that is not created by the province. We want to play a role supporting it. So, the Act also recognizes a quality assurance organization. I am the Founding Chair of the Board and Executive Director of that organization. We are responsible for approving, affirming, certifying—ensuring the quality of those institutes and the programs they wish to develop. We are still in the early, early days. We only set out in this new direction in December 2017. We are learning a lot.



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The lack of understanding and trust between the two, that's where we really had to build. The bureaucracy wanted metrics, and we would say well, we have no resources to do that. So slow down the bus, let's look at these issues a little differently... The only reason the Act was achieved, in my mind, was that both sides had a common goal. And we weren't trying to solve every issue on the table. But we did agree that it needed to be more than policy. Everyone agreed that it would be legislation.”

Co-creation

Sheldon Levy

Interim President and Vice-Chancellor of University Canada West,
Canada

When I was Deputy Minister, I asked where Indigenous institutes fit into Ontario, and I was told they fit in where private career colleges are. I said, but we have universities and colleges—why are we categorizing the Indigenous institutes as private, as if they were something leftover? And so we went on a journey to ask: in Ontario, can we have universities, colleges and Indigenous institutes and treat them all the same way? I would say there was a lot of goodwill. I don't want to say people were against it. Certainly the people in political power at the time were supportive.

But what happened is that everyone would use the word co-create, which I think implies that we're going on the journey together. And then the bureaucracy would say, "Well, I'll tell you where the journey is going to go: it's going to go to the coffee shop at the intersection of A and B, and by and large we're going to get a vanilla latte." The bureaucracy had a rulebook. Despite the goodwill, co-creation seemed like: I'll create, and you'll go to this coffee shop with me, and we'll fight over what size of vanilla latte to get.

I asked everyone to believe that if we travelled together, we would get to a good place. And I can tell you it was difficult because people were uncomfortable about colouring outside the lines. They were worried about their own accountability, about what happens if something goes wrong. The biggest part of the challenge was having people understand that you had their back on a new journey that we would take together, that we would truthfully co-create together. And when I reflect back, I think it was a joyful trip.

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When all was said and done, the only thing that disappointed me, to be honest, was that no one knew what we had accomplished, and I wanted a big celebration. Because Indigenous institutes can offer degrees, and the quality assurance is theirs. But I don't even think the rest of Canada knew what we accomplished, and it was truly amazing.”

The work ahead

Brent Tookenay

Chief Executive Officer, Seven Generation Education Institute, Ontario, Canada

I think today in Canada, with the unmarked graves and those recent findings—it's a shock to Canada, but it's not a shock to our First Nations people. And I think there's an opportunity now to create an education system that values our knowledges, our relationships to the land, and all the things that the bureaucracy and systems have crushed. For so long, the only thing that mattered was the Western way. And I think we have an opportunity now because obviously the Western way has not worked. Here we are in 2021, trying to figure out what does work. And you know what works? It starts with the non-Indigenous people in higher education institutes listening. Listening to our ancestors, our Elders, our Knowledge Keepers. This is what's important at this time in this country.

The Indigenous institutes in Ontario are in a much better spot now than we were five years ago, but we're not all the way there. We still have to scratch and claw and fight for everything that we want and justify it. One of the things that has been a long-standing goal of our board since day one was to have our own programming, degrees and diplomas. We're getting there, but there's still a lot of work ahead to validate the programs and why our knowledge systems are important, and why what we're doing as Indigenous people is important.

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As everyone knows, many of our First Nations don't have an economy in their communities. So, what does that look like in an Indigenous Institute? We have a real challenge to balance the need or desire for degrees and diplomas in higher education against the goals of the people in the communities who need training for employment. Where does an Indigenous institute fit there, and how do we support that?”

Valuing Indigenous knowledge

Dr. Élisabeth Kaine

UNESCO Chair on the Transmission of First Peoples' Culture
to Foster Well-Being and Empowerment
Professor, University of Quebec in Chicoutimi, Quebec, Canada

Maybe I can talk to you about my experience as an Indigenous teacher and researcher within a university over the course of a 30-year career. I created a curriculum with maximum content on Indigenous culture—philosophy, practices, methodologies, history. I wanted to transmit that knowledge to students who were mostly non-Indigenous, acknowledging that this is knowledge that is important for humanity.

I worked in formal education within Indigenous communities for about 20 years. I had a mobile team that would go to various communities to bring in knowledge on Indigenous design practices and design cultures. Some of these communities had lost that knowledge. They have to receive it again because unfortunately, the chain of transmission was broken.

And now I'm wondering if there couldn't be an organization that would work on a horizontal level with all the university institutions to try and bring about change. Because it's not just one single person within these really heavy and large structures (that change only with great difficulty) who can make a difference. It would take years and years for that. It should probably be a recognized Indigenous organization, one that can play that role of supporting institutions, helping them to change the many things that need to be changed. It's a large mandate.

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I think what is very important in education for young Indigenous people is that they feel that the world values them, that they're important for humanity, that their knowledge and their communities are scientifically valid and are needed.”

Language reclamation

Dr. Wesley Leonard

Assistant professor, University of California, Riverside, United States

Centering Indigenous points of view in language work, in education, is hugely, hugely important. Failing to do so creates a perpetual cycle of just adding a little bit of “Indigeneity,” if you will, to ways of being, doing and knowing that are otherwise non-Indigenous. This is the problem with hiring the one Indigenous person in a colonial institution and calling the Indigenization done. On the contrary, it’s the entire structure that needs to change.

I want to share two points that come out of my scholarly work that I think are relevant here. One is that rather than working in language revitalization, which is the common term, I instead work in what I call language reclamation. When I say reclamation, I’m talking about something that’s not focused on the language itself, but rather sees language as part of its broader relations. Something that is deeply attuned to community histories, ways of knowing, needs, goals, protocols. Something that centres a community’s right to speak a language, to claim the language, to allow it to change in a way that’s guided by community values and so on. Very often, I find that language revitalization as it is operationalized in broader higher education circles adopts and applies dominant non-Indigenous views of language. And indeed, while some of the methods themselves might be useful at times, ultimately, it’s still removing languages from their community contexts.

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Within the theme of language reclamation work, there is also a theme of decolonizing language itself. Language is very often viewed as a structural object, a thing that can be acquired or preserved. A thing that’s defined by grammatical patterns and vocabulary. But in all of the Indigenous contexts I’ve worked in, and for all of the Indigenous people I’ve spoken to, language is something much broader. People say language is us, language is medicine.”

Supporting Indigenous faculty

Dr. Megan Lukaniec

Assistant professor, Indigenous Studies, University of Victoria, Canada

It's clear to me from my three years at the University of Victoria how crucial it is to have Indigenous faculty and staff to shape, lead and govern these programs—not only to make sure the programs reflect what we need in our communities, but to ensure the cultural safety of our students.

If we want more Indigenous faculty, we need to think about how best to support Indigenous faculty members in order to change the face of higher education. You know, we jump through the hoops of higher education, we pursue our degrees, we get a job in higher education. When we get to the university, we shouldn't have to convince the university that these responsibilities are important. There should be mechanisms in place at universities to recognize and support Indigenous faculty members and the unique responsibilities that we have to our communities. We hold these responsibilities sacred. So why not have positions for Indigenous faculty members where we have dedicated time for honouring them?

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Our Indigenous Knowledge is encoded in our languages, right? And our culture is encoded in our languages. And so, if we can create programs and put programs in place that fit our communities' needs and values, that is a step in the right direction.”

Language equality

Chuutsqa Layla Rorick

University of Victoria, Canada

I would really like to see an emerging equality between the languages. I mean, we have 34 languages in British Columbia—35 if you count English, and even more if you count certain others. English shouldn't be the barrier that determines entry to certain institutions. We want to be able to create spaces for people to become language professionals, to graduate and step into roles that are waiting for them. What we're asking now is: Is that pathway supported by education? Is that pathway through economic means? We don't know... we're emerging, and we're concentrating on the speaking portion of our language reclamation.

I'm really, really happy to hear about the continued work in the world, to support people who can stay in their communities in the future and come out to share with each other.

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I come from a land-based immersion education background through my parents on our own territory. And I started to learn my language around 2010. Since then, higher education has been in and out of my language-learning journey. I'm mentoring this year. I'm concentrating on doing language immersion teaching for people. And I'm finding that I'm really coming back to life.”

Creating an Inuit university

Vanessa Chaperlin

Senior Policy Advisor, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, Canada

Ten years ago, a national strategy on Inuit education was published, and one of the recommendations was to develop an Inuit Nunangat university that is dreamed up, designed, governed and run by Inuit. We're engaged in that process now.

The beginning stages of learning in Inuit tradition are about observation and listening, so that's what we want to do at this stage, and is what we are doing through community engagement events. It's important that all four of our regions—Inuvialuit and Nunavut, Nunavik, and Nunatsiavut—are represented in these events. We will be hosting task force meetings to work on envisioning this university, and we recently hosted a student forum to hear from youth and learn what the university would mean to the people of Inuit Nunangat. We're starting to gather that data slowly.

We are working on specific development themes—location, academic programs, governance, educational philosophy—and asking questions like: What does the space look like, what does the building look like, where will students learn, where will it be located? How are students learning, what are they learning, who is learning and who is teaching? How can we support students with wraparound services? We're looking forward to digging deep into these areas at this initial envisioning and observational stage.

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In terms of educational philosophy, what are the pillars of this university? There are two principles that have been discussed and shared with us at these events. One is Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit, which translates literally to “what Inuit have always known to be true” (Inuit knowledge), and how Inuit will own, control and protect that knowledge. The second is the concept of Inunnguiniq—the process of becoming a human being.”

The importance of dialogue in rebuilding Indigenous education

Arnold Blackstar

Director of Strategic Policy and Research, Indigenous Advanced Education and Skills Council, Ontario, Canada

It is important to recall that Indigenous Peoples in Canada have experienced colonization processes through all forms of Western education that have tried to destroy their identities, languages, cultures, livelihoods, and land-based methods of learning and teaching. This remains problematic across the country.

However, in the Province of Ontario, there have been some improvements since the Indigenous Institute Act was passed in 2017. The Act recognizes Indigenous communities' control of their people's education. It recognizes First Nation community ownership and the need to assure the highest quality of education. That assurance comes from the Indigenous Advanced Education and Skills Council, a legislatively recognized organization. One of the Council's functions is to establish and implement standards and benchmarks. Its board of directors approves program capacity and quality and organizational capacity. Its board committee applies standards and benchmarks and identifies any other conditions that Indigenous institutes must meet.

Nine Indigenous institutes are now recognized under the Act and can develop and offer their own programs that have been assured through standards and benchmarks. All are part of a new Indigenous institute pillar that is, in turn, part of Ontario's overall post-secondary system. The system includes private career colleges, polytechnics, and public colleges and universities. No other province or territory in Canada has yet recognized the ability of post-secondary Indigenous institutes to do these things.

Looking beyond Ontario and Canada: Article 14 of the UN Declaration articulates that Indigenous Peoples have the right to control and establish their own education systems in a manner appropriate to their own methods of cultural learning and teaching. That article is also in the preamble of the Indigenous Institute Act. However, creating legislation is one thing; implementing it is another. To do its work, the Council has implemented a dialogue process with Indigenous institutes, learners and communities.

This dialogue engages experts in Indigenous education, knowledge and language, and includes the development of outcome documents. It provides the Council with evidence-based information and research and allows the Council to obtain information, direction and knowledge from Indigenous institutes and their representatives. It is an open and ongoing participatory process between the Council and the institutes, and includes learners, their teaching staff, students, community members and Knowledge Keepers. The dialogue supports the development, implementation and integrity of the quality assurance process within Ontario's Indigenous institutes pillar. It is helping to build consensus on issues that affect Indigenous institutes.

Such dialogue is a critical component of the commitment to make change in post-secondary education. It is an approach that leaves no one behind. We recommend that other jurisdictions consider its merit as they try to address challenges and options that involve the need to integrate, recognize and accredit knowledge systems that, until now, have remained outside of the public Western higher-education milieu.

“ Indigenous Peoples are the fastest-growing population in Canada, but our education attainment levels have not kept pace in the current university system. The way forward is to listen to our people, our Knowledge Keepers, Elders in our communities.”