

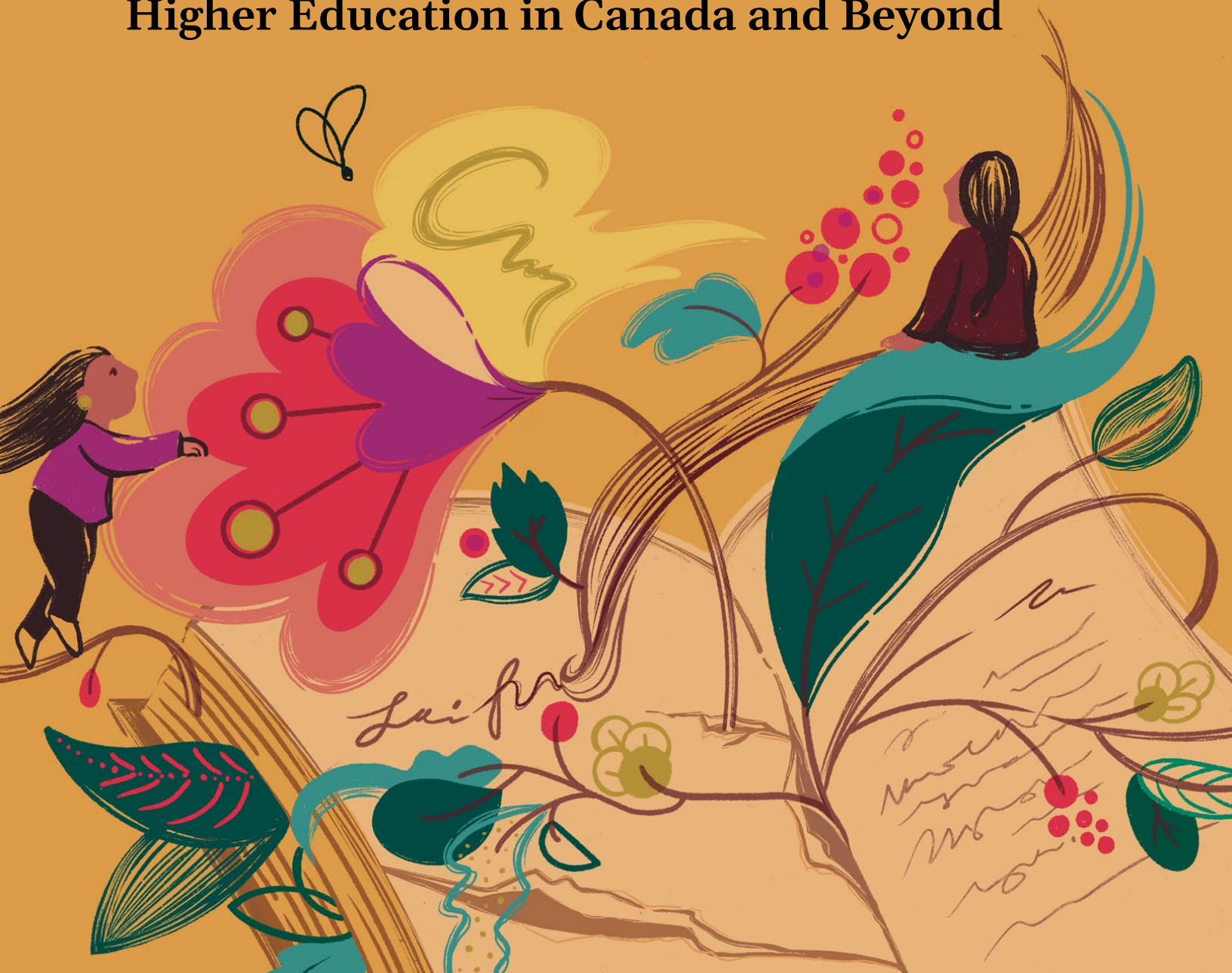


unesco

Canadian Commission



TOWARD A BETTER WORLD FOR ALL:
**Decoding, Deconstructing and Decolonizing
Higher Education in Canada and Beyond**





Abstract

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the UN agency responsible for ensuring quality and inclusive education for all, has stated that the future of higher education needs to be focused on ensuring the sustainability of our planet. This means the role of higher education institutions is no longer simply to prepare students to enter the workforce: it is also to ensure a sustainable and equitable future for all. In the Canadian context and globally, the pathway to a sustainable future could rest on ensuring that Indigenous worldviews, knowledges and ways of learning and doing are included in higher education.

In 2023, scholars and leaders gathered in Ottawa to learn about and discuss the implications of several exciting international policy initiatives related to higher education that have emerged from UNESCO circles over the past two years. It was also an opportunity to explore the reasons and strategies for decolonizing higher education. Experts—many of them Indigenous—who have been working with UNESCO shared their vision of a higher education system that is better equipped to meet the challenges of our times. This report, published by the Canadian Commission for UNESCO, invites readers to reflect on how we can decode, deconstruct and decolonize higher education in Canada and globally.



UNESCO Chair in Community Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education





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Foreword

A MESSAGE OF SUPPORT FROM SOBHI TAWIL,

Director, UNESCO's Future Learning and Innovation Division

The UN Secretary General has noted that we are at a crucial moment in our history. In *Our Common Agenda*, published in 2021, he wrote: “The choices we make, or fail to make, today could result in breakdown or breakthrough to a greener, better and safer future.”

At this historic juncture, higher education knowledge and research must be reimagined, perhaps even reinvented. Knowledge generation needs to be more future-oriented and more transdisciplinary if we are to face an uncertain future and find innovative solutions together. This is the spirit of the UNESCO chairs' program—an international, interdisciplinary network of almost 1,000 chairs in 120 countries.

Partners in Canada have shown great leadership in global debates about the future of higher education. Thirty-four [UNESCO networks and one UNITWIN network](#) are based in Canada. The Canadian Commission for UNESCO, the UNESCO Chair in Community-Based Research, the First Peoples' Cultural Foundation, the Indigenous Advanced Education & Skills Council, and the University of Toronto's Knowledge Equity Lab have combined their efforts to spark dialogue and change.

Going forward, I encourage you to share with your respective partners these debates around valuing multiple knowledge systems and promoting cooperation in higher education that are central to our collective quest for a just and sustainable future. The challenges may seem daunting, but the time is right for collective mobilization to transform higher education.



Background

The world is more than halfway to the finish line when it comes to the [17 Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#) that UN member states agreed to in 2015. The question is what that finish will look like in 2030. It is time for a sober evaluation of what remains to be done.

Goal 4 focuses on education, aiming to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.”

At least two of its targets (5 and 7) are pertinent for any discussion of decolonizing higher education:

- **TARGET 5 STATES:** By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, Indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations.
- **TARGET 7 STATES:** By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development.

Based on these targets, we should be working toward a world in which Indigenous Peoples everywhere have equal access to higher education that welcomes them and meets their needs. We should also be ensuring that our higher education institutions make the changes needed to promote sustainable development, including in their curricula, so that all students—Indigenous and non-Indigenous—can be part of the solution.

It is clear that these goals can support each other—but also that our higher education institutions have their work cut out for them. If the future of higher education is about ensuring sustainability, what better way than to include Indigenous worldviews in all teachings?

Yet according to Canada’s 2021 Census, just 12.9 per cent of Indigenous people in Canada had a bachelor’s degree versus 27.8 per cent of Canadian-born, non-Indigenous people—a gap that actually worsened from 2016 to 2021 (the rate of higher education rose for Indigenous people during those years, but not as much as it did for the broader population). Financing is part of the problem, but it is not the entire picture. Indigenous students need more mentorship and support to navigate institutions where they do not see themselves reflected.

Contributing to solving global problems is an important role for higher education institutions, but our institutions risk becoming irrelevant if they cannot do that. Developments like globalization, widespread travel and the internet have been making our world smaller for decades. At the same time, industrialization and reliance on fossil fuels have been driving a climate crisis that affects the entire planet and is only slated to worsen. Meanwhile, misinformation and political polarization are fuelling divisiveness, distrust, anger and authoritarianism around the world.

These are complex, multi-faceted problems that will require our best minds to solve. We cannot risk leaving anyone out. Nor can we risk ignoring centuries' worth of traditional and Indigenous knowledge built around respecting and understanding the natural environment. Higher education institutions must respond to these challenges. This report contains ideas about how they can do so.



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Purpose of this report

IT IS IMPORTANT TO CREATE SPACE TO REFLECT and learn about how to move forward with decolonizing and transforming higher education and advancing open science. More specifically, this report seeks to engage with higher education institutions, partners, foundations and research councils to:

- **REFLECT** on the future of higher education in Canada
- **ENSURE** Indigenous perspectives are front and centre of these discussions
- **PROMOTE** and engage with UNESCO's Open Science Recommendation through a decolonization lens
- **CONSIDER** UNESCO's proposed roadmap for the future of higher education and its implications for Canada

TO ACHIEVE these ambitions, UNESCO supports a collective vision for how higher education institutions in Canada can better contribute toward Agenda 2030 and the SDGs. By adopting UNESCO's priorities for higher education, we can:

- **BETTER** understand how Indigenous knowledge can transform higher education
- **CONNECT** higher education partners and encourage future collaborations and partnerships
- **ENCOURAGE** reflection on individual and collective actions to move this conversation forward





Acknowledgements

THIS REPORT WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN POSSIBLE WITHOUT CONTRIBUTIONS FROM:

- The UNESCO Co-Chairs in Community Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education (Budd Hall and Rajesh Tandon)
- The First Peoples' Cultural Foundation (Dr. Lorna Wánosts'a7 Williams)
- The Knowledge Equity Lab at the University of Toronto Scarborough (Leslie Chan)
- The Indigenous Advanced Education & Skills Council (IAESC) (Laurie Robinson)

The panel that served as the basis for this report was dedicated to the late Dr. Elisabeth Kaine, an Indigenous academic and researcher who was also the former UNESCO Chair in First Peoples' Cultural Transmission Through Increased Well-Being and Empowerment.

Supporting documents

UNESCO, CCUNESCO, IAESC and other partners have been working to decolonize higher education for some time. In recent years, these organizations have published a range of reports touching on various aspects of this goal. Together, these reports form a rapidly growing body of work to support and advocate for decolonizing higher education. Readers are invited to consult these documents for additional context, background and inspiration.

INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVES ON HIGHER EDUCATION

- CCUNESCO publication: [Indigenous Perspectives on Higher Education](#)
- IAESC report: [Indigenous Perspectives: Advancing Change in Higher Education](#)

DECOLONIZING SCIENCE

- UNESCO's [Recommendation on Open Science](#)
- CCUNESCO's white paper on [Open Science and the Decolonization of Knowledge](#)
- Universities Canada's [commitments to truth and reconciliation](#)

TRANSFORMING KNOWLEDGE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

- UNESCO roadmap: [Beyond Limits: New Ways to Reinvent Higher Education](#)
- UNESCO book: [Knowledge-driven actions: Transforming higher education for global sustainability](#)



Key themes

RECENT REPORTS FOCUSING on [Indigenous perspectives on higher education](#) have argued that institutions must be deconstructed and redesigned in meaningful ways to include (and feel inclusive to) Indigenous students by incorporating Indigenous knowledge systems, languages and values for the good of all students. New models must be co-created with Indigenous leadership to improve equity, decolonize knowledge, open science, reduce or end racism, and offer robust and culturally attuned support to students.

A CCUNESCO paper on [Open Science and the Decolonization of Knowledge](#) explains: “Culture, tradition, spirituality, relationships and time are all important components of Indigenous knowledge (which is science). The lack or loss of these has resulted in devastation, both for Indigenous Peoples and the world in general. There is fear that this may continue, but revitalizing these understandings is a source of hope for the next generation.”



Similarly, the Indigenous Advanced Education and Skills Council’s report on [Advancing Change in Higher Education](#) explains that “Indigenous worldviews and ways of learning and teaching can benefit not only Indigenous students, but all of humanity.” Everyone benefits from understanding the history and culture of the land that they live on.

The emerging global consensus on decolonizing education and promoting open science is the most exciting set of new directions for knowledge democracy and higher education to emerge in the field of education in decades. However, delivering the relevant messages to higher education leaders, policymakers, funders, political and community leaders, and others remains a tremendous challenge. The distance the recent global discourse and the day-to-day reality of our higher education institutions is vast.

This report highlights the need for systemic change in higher education, support for revitalizing Indigenous languages, decolonization and Indigenization, recognition and funding of Indigenous-led higher education institutions, more generous and creative student support, as well as faculty support and leadership. Please share it widely within your networks and discuss it with friends and colleagues.

The next section presents views from leading experts on the future of higher education. These were gathered during a national event and are not presented verbatim or in their entirety. They have been shortened and edited for brevity and clarity.





...THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION MUST be centred around sustainability, and this means prioritizing Indigenous knowledge. Sustainability is a central theme that is widely prevalent in higher education discourse today. To make our universities sustainable, we need to look toward making system-wide changes that include revitalizing Indigenous languages and protecting the unceded and contested lands of our Indigenous communities. Secondly, we must recognize the power structures within which our knowledge systems are embedded and ask, “Who’s knowledge are we accessing?” because at present, western knowledge defines the status quo, and this translates into the further empowerment of those already in power.”

*—Arushi Dahiya, student, University of Toronto Scarborough
Department of Global Development Studies*



Including Indigenous worldviews in all levels of education

Dr. Florence Glanfield, Vice-Provost (Indigenous Programming & Research) and Professor, Faculty of Education, University of Alberta

IMAGINE AN EDUCATIONAL SPACE WHERE ALL HUMANS, but particularly Indigenous youth, can succeed. That will only come from this practice of decoding, deconstructing and decolonizing. UNESCO has launched a global consultation process to reimagine how knowledge and learning can more positively shape the future of humanity and our planet. We have an opportunity to discuss what the possibilities are for higher education in Canada.

Let's explore what this ambitious process means in Canada. Let us delve into exciting international policy initiatives related to higher education that have come out of UNESCO circles over the past two years. Let us reflect on how we can decode, deconstruct and decolonize higher education. And let us try to answer, individually and collectively, this important question: If the future of higher education is about ensuring the sustainability of our planet, what better way than to include Indigenous worldviews in all teachings in higher education?

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Indigenizing the structures of higher education

*Dr. Lorna Wánosts'a7 Williams, University of Victoria
and First Peoples' Cultural Foundation*

THERE WAS A TIME WHEN A FIRST NATIONS person would lose their right to their homeland if they chose to go to university. That wasn't so very long ago in this country—so you can appreciate the scale of the journey we've had to take to be able to change things for Indigenous students: imagine losing the right to be in your homeland, on your land and with your family, if you chose to go to university.

That journey isn't over—we're just on a new leg of it, one that involves transforming the structure of higher education to make it less western-centric.

Many people across Canada have been working toward this in recent years and have made some great strides. There are now individuals in Canadian higher education institutions who are more aware of the value of imparting Indigenous knowledge and histories. For example, many Indigenous students didn't learn about the history of their people in this country until they went to university and encountered a professor who, usually on their own initiative, had decided to offer this knowledge. Nevertheless, the overall higher education structure itself continues to promote a very western worldview, and this needs to change.

A number of years ago, we began the work of creating change by initiating regional, national and international conversations about decolonizing higher education. I was so pleased when I learned that legislation in the Province of Ontario had led to the creation of the Indigenous Advanced Education & Skills Council (IAESC), enabling Indigenous higher education institutions to grant degrees. This is a huge step in Canada. We've had Indigenous higher education institutions in every province, but always under the responsibility of a white institution—all of them, including the First Nations University of Canada. These institutions could not create degrees unless a white institution said it was okay.

The creation of IAESC was huge in Ontario—and now its leaders are stepping up to help us to work on the additional systemic changes that need to be made to higher education.

HIGHER EDUCATION STRUCTURES PROMOTE A VERY WESTERN WORLDVIEW, AND THIS NEEDS TO CHANGE.



Equitable funding for Indigenous higher education institutions

*Laurie Robinson, Chair and former Executive Director,
Indigenous Advanced Education & Skills Council*


THE 2022 UNESCO WORLD HIGHER Education Conference led to a number of calls to action from Indigenous people around the world who had been contributing for a very long time to see change in higher education.

To understand the need for change, you first need to recognize how Indigenous people have been locked out of the education system historically. It is still very, very difficult to scale those walls. Those of us who did likely crawled in and found someone who cared enough to support us.

The 2022 calls spoke to the United Nations, its bodies and other institutions that can create change. We asked for a system-wide action plan to improve all aspects of higher education for Indigenous peoples, and to support and improve Indigenous higher education. Those are two different things: It's about supporting people, but it's also about creating our own systems and having them recognized. It's decolonization and indigenization.

But what is indigenization, and what are we trying to indigenize? Sorting that out is important. If we look at decolonization as a step, the future looks bright. But let's come together and do that. Let's look at new rules. Maybe UN member states need to consider funding Indigenous higher education institutions adequately, or at least on par with mainstream institutions.

In 2017, Ontario produced the Indigenous Institutes Act, a piece of legislation written jointly by First Nations people. That act does not create Indigenous institutions. It recognizes that nine Indigenous institutions exist, and that they are owned by their First Nations. In developing the act, the First Nations who were involved insisted on a guarantee that their kids and their kids' kids would have access to the highest education. They also insisted on the creation of a First Nations body to accredit Indigenous institutions. The result was the [Indigenous Advanced Education & Skills Council](#), which operates the same way a senate does in a university.



It's about supporting people, but it's also about creating our own systems and having them recognized. It's decolonization and indigenization.



THIS HAS BEEN A TREMENDOUS FIRST STEP.

However, we still face a funding issue. Indigenous education at these nine institutes is not funded on par with other higher education institutions in the province—not even close. The government does not recognize that these institutions might require funding for things like operations, equipment or maintenance. They get money for student support—in other words, to help students feel better so we can send them back into the ring again. But not for much else. And in order to continue receiving that funding, the schools have to offer programs from existing colleges and universities.

The funding keeps these institutions in their lanes, maintaining the status quo, without much capacity to grow and develop. To move forward with our goals, we need to address and revisit the way Indigenous higher education institutions are funded.



Open science and the importance of diverse knowledge systems

*Dr. Leslie Chan, Associate Professor, Department of Global Development Studies,
University of Toronto Scarborough, Knowledge Equity Lab*

I CAME TO THE UNIVERSITY
of Toronto as an older teenager many years ago from Hong Kong. Much to my embarrassment, it was only about 10 years ago that I realized the land that our university occupies was the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat and more recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. That was when I began to learn the history we're not taught at university.

In all the years I spent being educated, I never encountered Indigenous history. University curricula are all about a western-centric view of the world, particularly when it comes to how we do science.

In graduate school, I once heard another student say about me: "Oh, well, he's a banana, that's why he behaves like that." A banana means yellow on the outside and white on the inside. I came to recognize that essentially, I had been trained very much as a western-thinking person, without any other way of knowing the world. To succeed in the academy and climb the academic ladder, I had to learn how to be white. It's an odd thing about universities—they're supposed to be inclusive and diverse, yet to progress and get ahead, you also have to be "better than your peers."

Hardly a week goes by that the University of Toronto doesn't tell us we're number one in Canada and 18 in the world and so on. These statements and the contradictions they contain have really begun to bother me in the last 10 or 15 years, particularly as I have come to have a better understanding of the history of the land and of the erasure of Indigenous knowledge, language, cultures and identity. (I guess you could say I am becoming a decolonized banana.)

Because I happen to be working in the area known as "open science," I've been thinking for some time about how to make sure academic knowledge is accessible to everybody. In my earlier thinking, I was too preoccupied with access alone—as in, can you get it for free? I wasn't thinking enough about the power structures within which these knowledge systems are embedded.

Just because we have open access doesn't mean we have access to diverse knowledge systems. Whose knowledge are we accessing?



I now realize that just because we have open access to data and publications doesn't mean we have access to diverse knowledge systems. The question becomes: Whose knowledge are we accessing? Who is at the table making up the rules about what constitutes legitimate knowledge in the first place? And why do certain things get published and recognized while considerable knowledge from around the world continues to be sidelined?

I've been thinking about the knowledge production system and what it means for my teaching and my students. How can we make sure students are not still reading material mostly from dead white males? That they have access to diverse knowledge, and can take part in the production of that knowledge?

The Canadian government has policies on open science, but these are fairly "global North" definitions of science: very much about output, rule-making, compliance. What I have learned over the years is that those who already have the resources to do open science will continue to benefit even more unless we really rethink the structure of knowledge production itself.

Part of the solution lies in connecting higher education to community (such as through participatory research methods) and giving space to diverse knowledge systems.

“Fostering knowledge equity is not merely about improving access to education and knowledge. Rather, it should involve understanding why only certain knowledge is deemed valuable, who decides that, and who is given the opportunity to share and produce their knowledge. It is also about ensuring that people can access a diverse collection of work from various knowledge systems, not only research originating from the West and published in prestigious journals.... Unless we think critically about the knowledge production structures that impact all these things, we cannot truly begin to transform higher education and advance knowledge equity.”

*—Karma Salloum, student, University of Toronto Specialist
International Development Studies Co-op program*





How higher education institutions can remain socially relevant

Rajesh Tandon, Founding Director, PRIA & Co-Chair, UNESCO Chair in Community-based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education

A KEY MESSAGE FROM THE UNESCO World Higher Education Conference focused on the need for higher education institutions to find ways to engage with society more actively—because most of the time, they engage with themselves behind a large boundary wall with lots of greenery and old-fashioned houses. The rest of the world may have slums, may have people living in poverty, but inside, studies about poverty go on without reference to them.

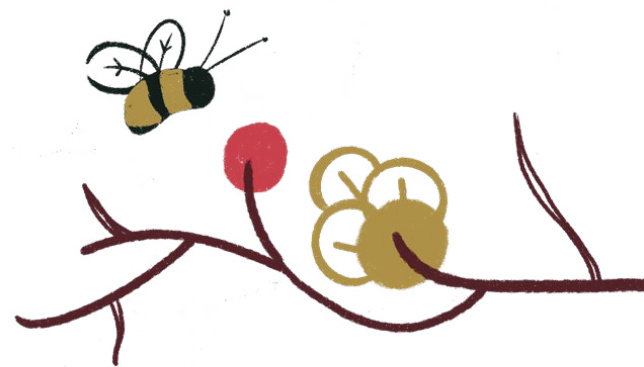
Higher education institutions need to break down these boundaries and engage with society so their teaching and research can remain relevant and so the students who are our future leaders are sensitive to the realities around them. An important part of this process is integrating diverse ways of knowing—fostering what UNESCO has called epistemic dialogue. We are finally at a juncture where the need for this is being recognized. Higher education institutions and policymakers are being implored to take note and do something about it.

We also need to look at how we produce and teach knowledge. If you look at issues from the perspective of sustainable development, if you frame your research through the lens of the communities facing sustainability and other challenges, you are forced to become interdisciplinary. If your lens is your own department or faculty, then you will be bound by your disciplinary rules and frameworks. The UNESCO recommendation on open science acknowledges multiple knowledge systems. It values and legitimizes participatory research and citizen science. It includes experiential practitioner and Indigenous knowledge. This open science recommendation, by the way, has been universally adopted by all member states.

Canadian universities are destinations for a large number of international students. But are these students being absorbed into a mainstream knowledge system, or are you offering them this perspective of multiple epistemologies, valuing Indigenous knowledge? Because all countries have Indigenous knowledge systems, experiential knowledge systems. And in all, mother tongues and multiple languages have been devalued. We are all receiving higher education in English (or sometimes French or Spanish—two other colonizer languages).

You have a responsibility. If even a small percentage of international students who came to Canadian campuses were provoked to think about these issues, they might return to their homelands with a more questioning mindset and an openness to alternative ways to design higher education systems.

Higher education institutions must engage with society so their teaching and research can remain relevant and so the students who are our future leaders are sensitive to the realities around them.





Rethinking higher education so it shapes the leaders we will need tomorrow

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

A FEW QUESTIONS COME TO MIND when I think about our higher education systems and how they have evolved: What have we done? What have we created? What are we supporting? And ultimately, how are these systems shaping our future?

Nearly every leader in Canada comes through our higher education institutions systems—and the same is true for other countries and their systems. Think about that: hundreds of millions of young people coming through these institutions, being shaped by them as they go. So the world we are living in today is created and deciphered by people who are the products of the monopolistic institutions and knowledge systems that we have inadvertently been supporting.

So, what do we do? It's all well and good to have great reports coming out of UNESCO, to see other networks finally recognizing the historic role that European knowledge has played—and the fact that the knowledge itself, not just the institution, has been colonized. But if our universities don't make space for deep conversations about what this means, then how do we begin to decolonize our systems?

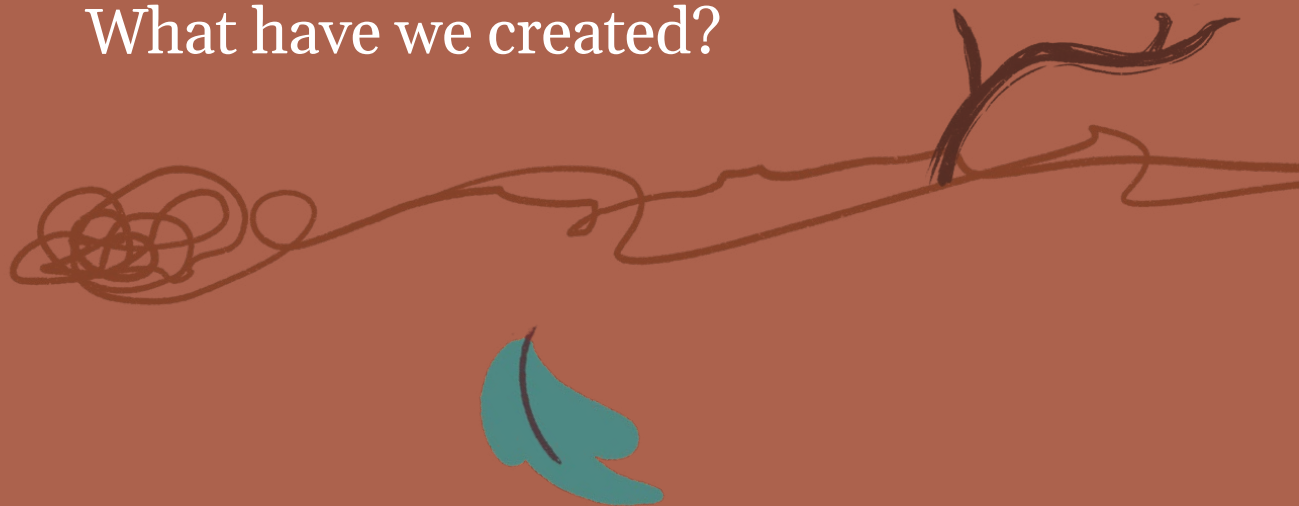
What I'm hoping is that some of you will find ways to pass on these messages. These messages hold the emotional power that we need for transformation. They are the heart, and until we can engage the heart, we're not likely to make any progress.

We human beings are clever, yes, but look where we've taken this planet. We have run away from the land and abandoned the tools that the Creator gave us. We became so preoccupied with the miraculous intellectual development of the Enlightenment and so fascinated with the world of western science that we've separated our minds from our hearts and our bodies from the land and have ended up in this situation.

But the page is turning. The Earth is speaking to us. It is calling us to think about what kind of knowledge we need in this age that we live in.

We are still celebrating the fact that we recently had, for the first time ever, a really solid panel focusing on Indigenous perspectives on higher education at a global conference. But it was the first in 500 years. Are we going to wait another 500 years to get this all done? I hope not.

THE WORLD WE LIVE IN TODAY IS CREATED
and deciphered by people
who are the products of the
monopolistic institutions and
knowledge systems that we have
inadvertently been supporting.
What have we done?
What have we created?





Educational principles based on Truth and Reconciliation

*Ann Mainville-Neeson, Vice-President, Policy, External and Member Relations,
Universities Canada*

UNIVERSITIES CANADA RECENTLY strengthened principles on Indigenous Education (first adopted in 2015). In fact, they are no longer just principles—they are [commitments to Truth and Reconciliation](#) at every level of the institution, from governance to teaching to support for students. And all of our member institutions have agreed to adhere to them, including support for the resurgence of Indigenous languages.

On their way to becoming commitments, the principles went through a thorough vetting process. They were formulated after extensive consultation with communities across Canada—because Universities Canada represents non-profit and public institutions across the country—and with many First Nations. Indigenous people brought extensive insight into what was missing in our 2015 principles.

We now have a principle that applies to policies, strategic plans and governance. A second applies to Indigenous student success. A third focuses on teaching and learning, and contains a commitment to supporting the resurgence of Indigenous languages.

A fourth is specific to research, including the need to commit to research partnerships with First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities. In other words, it's no longer about researching Indigenous people, but researching with Indigenous people.

The fifth commitment relates to community engagement and the need to ensure that we are not engaging just with ourselves, but with communities. We want to develop reciprocal relationships of accountability so we can better serve all students and ensure everyone benefits from understanding the history and culture of the land they're on, whether or not they are Indigenous.

The sixth commitment is with respect to supporting people. We need to support our students, but also the researchers, teachers, learners and support staff—all the people who are together responsible for the success of the institution. There was much discussion about this particular commitment because we ask so much of our various persons who are First Nations members. We call upon the same people over and over. We need to support them and ensure that we have enough Indigenous people in our institutions so there is a community.

These commitments were designed to emphasize attachment to the Earth, to culture and to people. Our member institutions are at different moments in their journeys toward reconciliation, and we are facilitating those journeys by holding Building Reconciliation Forums.

We are excited about what these forums can bring to the dialogue and how they can move us forward so that all institutions can learn from each other on their journey toward Truth and Reconciliation.

In its 2015 report, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) made 94 Calls to Action to redress the legacy of residential schools and advance reconciliation. Post-secondary education figures prominently among the areas where action is needed to foster reconciliation. For example, the TRC called on governments to:

- **PROVIDE ADEQUATE FUNDING** to end the backlog of First Nations students seeking a post-secondary education
- **PROVIDE THE NECESSARY FUNDING** to post-secondary institutions to educate teachers on how to integrate Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods into classrooms
- **MAINTAIN AN ANNUAL COMMITMENT** to Indigenous education issues, including building capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy and mutual respect
- **WORK WITH THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES** Research Council and post-secondary institutions in collaboration with Indigenous peoples to establish a national research program to advance understanding of reconciliation.



Universities Canada's commitments to Truth and Reconciliation have been designed to emphasize attachment to the Earth, to culture and to people.





The need for mentorship and support for Indigenous graduate students

Gaëlle Mollen, Indigenous Languages Advisor, Canadian Museum of History

IN THE SMALL QUEBEC COMMUNITY THAT I COME FROM

there is no university. To go to university, you have to leave home. I moved to Ottawa for university, not just to pursue my bachelor's degree in anthropology and Indigenous studies, but because I wanted to work in international development.

I had grown up with my mother all my life, so I knew the Innu way of life, and I really wanted to discover the other part of myself. When I took an anthropology course at the University of Ottawa, I finally learned more about parts of my history—the whole story behind being Innu. It wasn't something I had been taught, so I learned most of what I now know as an adult.

I was able to finish a master's degree in anthropology with support from my advisor. But what I discovered is that there isn't much guidance at the graduate level. The University of Ottawa has an Indigenous Resource Centre, which helps a lot with undergraduate students. But at the master's and doctorate levels, I did not find adequate support. I know that once you've finished your undergraduate degree, you're supposed to know everything about how to do a graduate degree, but that wasn't the case for me. My family was very encouraging, but they couldn't give me specific guidance, and several times, I almost gave up: I felt out of place and had no Indigenous peers to talk to. My advisor helped me considerably, and I was able to finish.

I may still pursue a doctorate. But I think Indigenous students who want to go on to graduate studies need more support—mentors, people they can talk to. I found it extremely difficult. I recently accepted a position as an advisor at the Canadian History Museum. This position was created last year to increase the visibility of Indigenous languages. In connection with my work, I'd like to pursue my doctoral studies, but I'd love to do that in a place that would allow me, for example, to submit a project in a format other than a thesis—such as a podcast, video or voice recording. What I hope for in the future is that people who have an interest in languages can submit graduate work in a format other than writing and that it would be considered just as valid.

INDIGENOUS STUDENTS WHO WANT TO GO ON TO GRADUATE STUDIES NEED MORE SUPPORT—MENTORS, PEOPLE THEY CAN TALK TO.



Free education and proper funding for Indigenous institutions

Rongo Wetere, Founder, Te Wananga o Aotearoa tertiary institution in New Zealand and Officer of the Order of New Zealand of Merit

CHANGE WILL NOT HAPPEN UNTIL you have funded Indigenous institutions in Canada, America, and many other places in the world. I'm absolutely convinced of that. It took me 15 years of hard slogging in New Zealand to establish a Māori Indigenous university, but now we have three of them, and they are making huge changes across New Zealand for our language and our culture, which was visibly dying in the eighties.

I cannot believe that this great country of Canada can have more than 100 universities, but not a single Indigenous one that is properly funded. How can this be in the 21st century?

Free education is also important. That would give Indigenous people the opportunity to rise from the bottom. There are a number of countries in this world that provide this, including some of the poorest countries—such as Cuba, Morocco and Mexico. Yet in mainstream countries like Australia, Canada and the United States, you do not.

What I want is to see more Indigenous students who can attend higher education institutions. You have to lift the people from the bottom if you want to reduce social costs. You have to give them the confidence that they can succeed.

I cannot believe that this great country of Canada can have more than 100 universities and not a single Indigenous one that is properly funded.



Three principles and seven dreams

Denise Amyot, President and CEO, Colleges and Institutes Canada

THERE ARE THREE BIG PREMISES we need to consider when it comes to decolonizing higher education.

The first is that Indigenous education cannot be an afterthought. It should be part of the mainstream—such that you cannot go without Indigenous education, whether you are Indigenous or not. We need to learn from Indigenous people because they know things we don't. I really think our planet would not be in the shape it is right now if we had listened better to Indigenous people.

The second premise is EDI: equity, diversity and inclusion. Because when we have these discussions, we need to think about all groups, and we have a long way to go in Canada.

The third premise is the SDGs. These are showing us the way. These 17 goals are key to ensuring our planet will survive. I also have seven dreams for transforming higher education that I would like to share.

- **THE FIRST IS THAT INDIGENOUS EDUCATION** is an integral part of education everywhere—not only for Indigenous institutions, but for all institutions at all levels: elementary, high school, post-secondary.
- **SECOND, WE NEED OUR OWN BOLOGNA PROCESS** in Canada¹. It does not make sense that each institution must create an articulation agreement for every single program they want to have recognized.

- **I WOULD LIKE TO SEE MULTI-DISCIPLINARY** diplomas and degrees so students can invent their own programs because we don't know what the jobs of tomorrow will be.
- **WE NEED SUSTAINABLE FUNDING**, not only from an institutional point of view, but also from an individual's. Students must be able to afford to study. I envy the European countries where post-secondary education is free in. Why not in Canada?
- **PEOPLE NEED TO BE RECOGNIZED** for what they already know. My dream is that, on the day you arrive to register, we assess you for what you know, and then you do only what is needed for what you want to achieve.
- **I WOULD LIKE STUDENTS TO BE** able to start school on any day of the year. Why should they need to wait until September or January to begin?
- **FINALLY, I DREAM OF MAKING LIFELONG LEARNING** easier to pursue—because learning is never finished. I imagine institutions that say, "All our graduates will have free tuition for one or two courses in the first five years after they will graduate."

¹ The Bologna Process is a series of ministerial meetings and agreements between European countries to ensure comparability in the standards and quality of higher-education qualifications.



INDIGENOUS EDUCATION SHOULD BE AN INTEGRAL PART OF EDUCATION EVERYWHERE—not only for Indigenous institutions, but for all institutions at all levels: elementary, high school, post-secondary. I really think our planet would not be in the shape it is right now if we had listened better to Indigenous people.





A new social contract for higher education

*Dr. Anoush F. Terjanian, Fellow, Human Rights Research and Education Centre,
University of Ottawa, and former member of SSHRC's Governing Council
(2018–2023)*

THE NEW UNESCO MANIFESTO ASKS US to 'reimagine our futures together'. But it is around the subtitle: "A new social contract for education" that we are invited to join hands and advance change. Invoking a social contract is a political gesture. But what does it mean? To reimagine our futures together, I invite you, in a Quechuan mode, to look ahead of us, to the past, and in doing so, to begin to decolonize the major knowledge and political institutions of academia.

If we look at the frontispiece of the first European social contract theory, Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651), we find the body of the omnipotent and terrifying sovereign (the Leviathan), encapsulating all of the people who have entered into a contract with him: he keeps these subjects safe from a life that is, for Hobbes, a "warre of all against all" and "solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short"—and they submit loyalty and obedience. This view in many ways summarises the model of governance which still appears to dominate in most institutions of higher education in Canada. A century later, Jean-Jacques Rousseau famously sought to understand the origins of inequality, and proposed two solutions, both published in 1762. *Émile ou De l'éducation* set out a private solution: a curriculum for creating and educating good citizens, at home. Rousseau's second solution to inequality was a public one: a new social contract theory, in explicit contrast to Hobbes's.

Rousseau outlined a system presuming human dignity, goodness, and honouring agency. Everyone is sovereign, and to ensure our dignity we deploy our sovereignty freely into a social contract expressing our shared will—*volonté générale*—because we understand that living together well is the source of our peace, well-being, and emancipation. So we decide and govern together, in our shared interest. And this shared governance is understood as the source of ideas that empower and enhance creativity and innovation.



It is this social contract of Rousseau's that, in part, sparked a revolution toward a new democratic mode of political governance, and which the revolutionaries who created the first National Assembly borrowed from in 1789. This revolution has yet to occur in our institutions of higher education.

How are we going to implement a new social contract for higher education if we don't reimagine our modes of governance in higher education? How can we meet Élisabeth Kaine's wish for well-being and empowerment when our models for governing science and higher education are closer to Hobbes than Rousseau? Looking forward to the past, we see how a colonial mindset keeps us trapped in the king's body. We need a transformation in governance to accompany our social transformations: to address injustice, and to reimagine pluralist modes of governance for our beautiful constellation of inhabitants in Canada and on Turtle Island—autonomous, enlightened, transparent, accountable, inclusive. Let us imagine this for our higher education, but also for our living together and for our common good.

“No real progress has been made to decolonize the major knowledge and political institutions of academia...”

—Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (2021)

HOW ARE WE GOING TO IMPLEMENT A NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT FOR HIGHER EDUCATION, AS UNESCO INVITES US TO DO, IF WE DON'T FIRST REIMAGINE OUR MODES OF GOVERNANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION?





Recommendations

Based on the insights presented herein and previous conversations with Indigenous knowledge-keepers and scholars from Canada and around the globe, we invite higher education institutions to take the following steps.

1. FOLLOW THE ROADMAP FOR THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN CANADA

as set out in the [Indigenous Perspectives: Advancing Change in Higher Education](#) report.

Important elements include:

- Systemic change
- Support for revitalizing Indigenous languages
- Decolonization and indigenization of knowledge and education systems
- New roles, recognition and funding for Indigenous-led higher education institutions
- More generous and creative student support
- Better faculty support and leadership

2. ENSURE FREE AND OPEN ACCESS TO TEXT, data and other forms of academic knowledge, as described in the [UNESCO Recommendation on Open Science](#). Open science recognizes knowledge created from diverse social sectors by those who are often excluded in academia, yet whose contributions are equally important. This entails recognizing Indigenous and ancient land-based knowledge systems as legitimate and equal ways of knowing.

3. VALIDATE AND RESPECT DIVERSE KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS. There should be more diversity among those who produce knowledge and decide what constitutes legitimate knowledge. The entire knowledge production system must be re-evaluated.

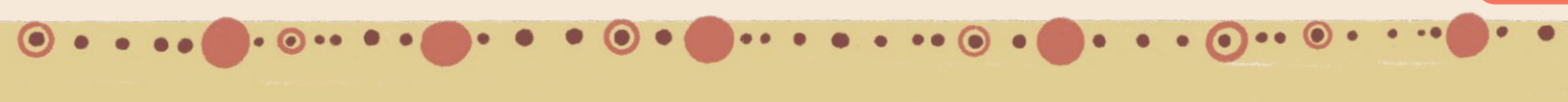
4. INFLUENCE INSTITUTIONS BEYOND THE CANADIAN BORDER to move toward decolonizing their higher education systems. These include research council grants, organizations that award student scholarships and grants, and post-secondary schools. If you work within these organizations, reflect on what you can do to influence your peers and others.

5. TEACH AND INCORPORATE INDIGENOUS WORLDVIEWS in all subjects to all students, including non-Indigenous students. This will support and ensure the sustainability of our planet.

6. DECOLONIZE AND INDIGENIZE ALL THE STRUCTURES OF HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEMS AND INSTITUTIONS. Higher education must shift from its current western-centric perspective to include Indigenous perspectives, knowledges and ways of knowing. This cannot be left up to individual teachers or professors. Systemic change is required.



- 7. SUPPORT EQUITABLE FUNDING FOR INDIGENOUS HIGHER EDUCATION** institutions by providing resources equivalent to those received by mainstream institutions. While funding for student support is important, Indigenous higher education institutions also require funding for everything else they do. In addition, education must be affordable and sustainable for all students.
- 8. CONNECT LEARNING AND TEACHING TO SOCIETY, COMMUNITY AND REAL-WORLD EVENTS.** For higher education to remain relevant, students (who are our future leaders) must understand the realities around them.
- 9. ADDRESS THE WORLD'S MOST PRESSING CHALLENGES.** Widen western scientific perspectives and listen to what Mother Earth is trying to say. New sources of knowledge, including Indigenous knowledge, need to be acknowledged if we are to respond to the unfolding environmental crisis.
- 10. ENACT AND FOLLOW EDUCATIONAL PRINCIPLES THAT ARE BASED IN TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION.** This means committing to better governance, Indigenous student success, Indigenous language revitalization, research partnerships that include Indigenous people and communities, community engagement, and better supports for students, faculty and other staff.
- 11. REIMAGINE MODES OF GOVERNANCE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION** as the starting point for implementing a new social contract for education and the common good of all.
- 12. OFFER FREE TUITION FOR INDIGENOUS STUDENTS** from nearby First Nations or beyond, as at least two post-secondary institutions in Canada have already begun doing.
- 13. CONTINUE THIS DIALOGUE** with key players in higher education across Canada and around the world. This conversation is not finished. It is just beginning.





Discussion Guide: An Invitation to Engage

UNESCO HAS INVITED THE GLOBAL COMMUNITY to reflect on the future of higher education. Key messages that have emerged (see the [Summary of supporting documents](#) section for links to download) are:

- **Higher education must seek** to address the world's most pressing problems by [transforming knowledge for a just and sustainable future](#)
- **Higher education must implement** the [UNESCO Recommendation on Open Science](#) by ensuring open and free access to text, data and other forms of academic knowledge
- **Diverse knowledge systems must be included** in higher education, in particular [Indigenous worldviews and ways of learning and knowing](#)

These three publications contain ground-breaking ideas that can revolutionize higher education worldwide. However, the ideas contained in them will not influence our work in Canada (or elsewhere) if they are not known and if we do not engage with them. Therefore, we invite you to initiate discussions of these publications and the messages and ideas they contain with your colleagues, higher education institutions, campuses and community at large.

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

Before you launch these conversations, consider:

- **Where you're located**—The ancestral land and territory and its relation to First Nations, Métis and Inuit
- **Who to invite into these conversations**—Apply an intergenerational and inclusion and equity lens
- **Inclusive hosting practices**—Ensure everyone feels welcome in terms of accessibility, language, and any other potentially excluding factors (feeding people is also a great thing to do!)
- **Setting the context**—Don't assume everyone is on the same page; do present a summary of this report and its recommendations
- **Decolonizing your conversation**—Invite Indigenous voices to be front and centre, and structure the gathering accordingly

Below are some sample questions to help spark a lively exchange, generate new ideas and get the word out. But before you delve into these, spend some time considering the following questions:

- **How is your team or organization already advancing** some of the recommendations in this report?
- **What can you do** to build on these successes?
- **What gaps and barriers** still exist?

- **What would be the most appropriate** and effective approach to address the recommendations? What easy steps forward can you take right now?
- **What can you do as an individual?** Within your team? Within your organization? Within your community?

LAUNCHING THE DISCUSSION

With students, colleagues, friends or another assembled group, discuss the following questions.

GETTING STARTED: A deep dive to understand the key messages and recommendations

1. **If we want higher education to address** the world's most pressing problems, how can we accelerate the transformation of our institutions to contribute to a more just and sustainable future? How can Indigenous knowledge systems contribute to this transformation?
2. **Open Science means openness** beyond text and data to include openness to knowledge created by societal actors and knowledge from Indigenous and other systems of knowing. What does this mean for teaching, research, libraries and engagement?
3. **Canadian higher education institutions** are being called to move toward decolonization, Indigenization and reconciliation. What does this look like at your institution?

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION TO BEGIN TRANSFORMING CONVERSATION INTO ACTION

4. **How is our team or organization** already advancing some of these recommendations?
5. **What can we do** to build on these successes?
6. **What gaps** and barriers still exist?
7. **What would be the most appropriate** and effective approach to address these recommendations? What would be an easy step forward?
8. **What can I do as an individual?** Within my team? Within the organization? Within my community?
9. **How can we transform academic knowledge** cultures from competition to collaboration? How can this be done?
10. **To solve the world's most pressing problems**, we need co-construction of knowledge between higher education institutions and community, and Indigenous sectors. How can the knowledge creation and sharing capacities of non-higher education groups be strengthened?



TOWARD A BETTER WORLD FOR ALL:
**Decoding, Deconstructing and
Decolonizing Higher Education
in Canada and Beyond**

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