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Transforming Higher Education Through Indigenous Community-led Innovations

Author(s)

Brennan, Jennifer, Head of Canada Programs, Mastercard Foundation

Ahmed, Shukri, Program Intern, Mastercard Foundation

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Abstract

Indigenous-led innovations are transforming higher education ensuring greater quality and relevance, increasing access and retention, and centering Indigenous knowledge and pedagogies. Success of Indigenous students in post-secondary education requires a holistic approach that takes each student into account as a whole person, with their families and communities. Effective programming that understands the complex, deep and longstanding issues that impact Indigenous students is essential for Indigenous students' success in post secondary education. The future of post-secondary education for Indigenous communities, and all citizens, must be grounded in place where local and global knowledge comes together, where holistic supports are offered to ensure student success, and where the self-determining aspirations of students and their Indigenous Nations shape educational offerings.

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Executive / Summary:

Higher education is crucial for Indigenous peoples' capacity building, self-determination and addressing compounded systemic barriers. However, higher education has equally played an influential role in perpetuating the colonial practices undermining Indigenous languages, cultures, and knowledge. Therefore, deep integrated learning centering Indigenous world views and deep relationships including embracing protocol and ceremonies is critical for Indigenous student success, a more sustainable future, and meaningful livelihoods. The purpose of this policy paper is to articulate the need to build reciprocal partnerships with Indigenous peoples to foster culturally relevant education infused with Indigenous wisdom and expertise. Although the number of Indigenous students obtaining post-secondary education is increasing, Indigenous students tend to face multiple barriers. These challenges remain because the education system is not informed by Indigenous world view and lacks relevance to Indigenous cultures and socio-economic conditions.

Key Message:

Indigenous-led innovations are essential to transform higher education to strengthen access, inclusion, youth success and sustainability for all.

Introduction: Mastercard Foundation

The Mastercard Foundation seeks a world where everyone has the opportunity to learn and prosper. Through its Young Africa Works strategy, Scholars Program, and EleV initiative in Canada, the Foundation works with partners to ensure that millions of young people access quality education, financial services, and dignified work. The Foundation's work is guided by the values of Humility, Listening, Kindness and Respect, Co-Creation, and Impact.

The Mastercard Foundation launched its EleV Program in 2017 to support Indigenous youth on their journey through education and on to meaningful livelihoods based on their

values, cultures, and worldviews. The Program has since expanded to numerous partnerships across all regions of the country. The vision for EleV, a vision co-created and confirmed with Indigenous youth and communities, is for Indigenous youth to be living *Mino Bimaadiziwin* – meaning “a good life” in Anishinaabemowin (the Anishinaabe language). *Mino Bimaadiziwin* is a holistic and Indigenized view of success – not simply employment but a meaningful livelihood, a fulfilling life, a life consistent with one’s traditions and values.

To achieve this vision, EleV’s goal is for education and employment systems to be transformed to enable 30,000 Indigenous young people to access post-secondary education, and transition to a meaningful livelihood, including employment and entrepreneurship. Realizing this vision requires a larger and more fundamental effort towards systems change – transforming education, training, and employment systems based on the direction of Indigenous youth, communities, and Nations so that these systems value and embed Indigenous languages, cultures, and worldviews, and support success for Indigenous youth.

Indigenous youth, and Indigenous communities and Nations, are central to the work of EleV and they will lead the work. We will centre and amplify the voices and vision of Indigenous youth in all we do. Young Indigenous people are always meaningfully engaged. EleV works with Indigenous-led entities working in the fields of education, training and employment, and post-secondary institutions that have deep partnerships with Indigenous communities.

Background and Context

Since 1970s there has been ongoing efforts to increase the Indigenous people’s participation, completion, and success in Canadian higher education by institutions, government, and Indigenous nations. However, there is a visible existing gap in postsecondary education (PSE) participation, particularly university education, between Indigenous people and the rest of the non-Indigenous population in Canada. The continues educational attainment gap between two groups are because of historical, cultural, and systemic barriers. The low PSE participation rates of Indigenous people is an outcome of a series of acute barriers such as inadequate financial support, insufficient academic preparation, lack of motivation and aspirations, geographical distance,

language and cultural differences, school-related factors, and personal barriers faced by Indigenous people in Canada. The history of education for Indigenous people in Canada has structural and social roots covered with marginalization and subjugation. For instance, the intergenerational impact and memory of the residential school system continues to negatively impact Indigenous communities. The memory of education system being used as a weapon to “kill the Indian in the child” in the past decades has left deep scars and mistrust of Indigenous communities in mainstream Canadian education system. Addressing those barriers effectively requires understanding the pertinent issues regarding Indigenous education in Canada such as participation and access to decolonized¹ higher education from Indigenous perspective. Consideration of lived experiences and the structural oppression Indigenous student faced in the Canadian education system is critical when creating and developing programs addressing the systemic issues. While the number of Indigenous student on college campuses has increased over the last 50 years, the focus to improve and create space within predominately Euro-Western defined and ascribed structures, academic disciplines, policies, and practices to create meaningful spaces for Indigenous peoples is a still challenging task. Reclaiming Indigenous education is key step in reclaiming the culture lost due to the residential school system. Therefore, key to increasing Post Secondary Education attainment is to allow Indigenous communities spreadhead advances in Indigenous language learning, cultural curricula, and expansion in education resources to Indigenous institutions.

Inclusion in Higher Education System from an Indigenous Perspective

Access to higher education is a fundamental human right enshrined in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights² and United Nations Declaration on The Rights of Indigenous People³. Addressing Indigenous educational disadvantage remains a pressing public policy challenge as it is fundamental to ‘closing the gap’ on social, health

¹<https://policyoptions.irpp.org/fr/magazines/october-2020/decolonizing-post-secondary-institutions-takes-a-community>

and employment outcomes. Thinking of the extensive social and private benefits that higher education generates, ensuring inclusive access and success is essential to achieve social justice and transformation. Education being the key to change and the only way to create long-term sustainable and meaningful livelihoods, it accelerates momentum to build strong Nations grounded in culture and language, respect for the lands and waters, and sustainable and diverse economies. With this premise in mind, education had to be informed from Indigenous perspectives and pathways of knowing including language, culture, embracing protocols and ceremony, self determination and centralizing indigenous world views. Integrating traditional Indigenous education into mainstream education system is not an important aspect of indigenization but it provides awareness, values needed to survive as individuals, and to be contributing members of their community with meaningful livelihoods. Indigenization of the academy refers to the meaningful inclusion of Indigenous knowledge(s), in ⁴everyday fabric of the institution from policies to practices across all levels, not just in curriculum^[10]. Shifting institutions to become inclusive for Indigenous people is critical for reasons that are ethical, socially just, equitable and inspiring for Indigenous people. Communities, scholars, and administrators want better relationships, but are faced with the challenging tasks of reconciling these aspirations with university culture that is still, for most ⁵ invested in Indigenous erasure and marginalization⁶.

What does Inclusion in Higher Education Mean for Indigenous Students?

Too often, the Canadian education system is disconnected and distant from the Indigenous communities, their worldview, language, and diverse cultures. Therefore, the lack of relevance, respect and resources is causing a critical gap in education between Indigenous and non- Indigenous Canadians. The tragic legacy of failed education policy of the Canadian government including residential schools' cultural genocide continues to this day and it impacts an important aspect of Indigenous students' identity. The dilemma that Indigenous students face when they go to the university is a lack of respect, not just

⁴ Pidgeon, M., 2016. More than a checklist: Meaningful Indigenous inclusion in higher education. *Social inclusion*, 4(1), pp.77-91.

There are no sources in the current document.

⁶ Gaudry, A. and Lorenz, D., 2018. Indigenization as inclusion, reconciliation, and decolonization: Navigating the different visions for indigenizing the Canadian Academy. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 14(3), pp.218-227.

as individuals, but more deeply as a people. The university environment is often an unwelcoming, intimidating and hostile for Indigenous students. Little of what they bring in the way of cultural knowledge, traditions and core values is accepted, much less respected. Also, they are expected to leave their cultural identity and assume a new form of reality, a reality which is often significantly different from their own.

Creating an inclusive higher education system involves not only creating the conditions for inclusivity (be it through curriculum, architecture, accessibility etc.) but also by creating activity and challenging the reproduction of inequality. It is a way of working to more open fairer education landscape and towards social justice for historically disadvantaged students. Incorporating Indigenous perspective in the classrooms is not only would be transformative experience but increased awareness amongst educational institution and of the need for change. To genuinely enable Indigenous student success, educational systems must respect Indigenous students for who they are, be relevant, offer reciprocity and help them exercise responsibility over their own lives. To do this, institutions must actively seek to empower and hire representative faculties and commit to ensuring curriculums that are based in truth and diverse perspectives.

Quality and Relevant Programming

Indigenous communities have taken steps to preserve and promote their cultures and especially Indigenous languages. Alternative pathway programs are emerging that incorporate land-based and experiential teaching providing holistic education that aims to instill both pride and knowledge. These alternative programs offer a pathway into meaningful higher education and allow flexible choices of program and courses. The implementation of these programs takes a variety of forms including delivery through community learning hubs and work-integrated learning opportunities such as land-based learning and land guardian training. The outcome from these programs have shown a higher degree of course completion, as well as increased confidence, happiness, and self-awareness. These community-based approaches demonstrate the importance of prioritizing and expanding Indigenous community involvement. Building connections outside the classroom and creating space for co-creation between students, communities and institutions increases the relevance of programming to community wellbeing and success.

Recommendations

The benefits of higher education are broader than individual employment opportunity. Higher education can and should play a role in enabling broader benefits to society increasing mutual understanding and enabling future generations to have more opportunities to connect with and contribute to their communities⁷.

1. The tendency of situating Indigenous peoples and cultures in the distant past in higher education needs to shift by respecting Indigenous knowledge(s) languages, and scholarship. In addition, acknowledging the past role of higher education in colonialism is vital to begin to shift the narrative towards an accurate and inclusive approach to higher education. The myth of Canadian diversity and multiculturalism without Indigenous people's history is perpetuating a cycle of continuity of colonialism. The prolonged process of assimilation that dispositioned Indigenous knowledge (s) must be replaced with relevant, accurate, and decolonized education.
2. The systemic racism and other forms of discrimination Indigenous student face in higher education has contributed to educational gap between Indigenous and non- Indigenous Canadian. Dismantling structural barriers and overcoming systemic racisms in higher education requires inclusivity that is intentional, driven and supported by resources and opportunities such as fostering identity, facilitating well-being, connecting, and honouring the land, and recognizing the inherent right to self -determination. There is need for systemic change to decolonize education.
3. Education is critical for improving quality of life, health and wellbeing of Indigenous people and communities. Transformational education for Indigenous people must be relevant to the social, economic, and political aspiration of Indigenous peoples. It must address the deeply rooted social and economic challenges faced by Indigenous communities and foster economic development aligned with community rights and aspirations to strengthen families and overcome socioeconomic challenges including poverty, addictions, incarceration,

⁷ Brennan, J., Deer, F., Trilokekar, R.D., Findlay, L., Foster, K., Laforest, G., Wheelahan, L. and Wright, J.M., 2021. Investing in a better future: higher education and post-COVID Canada. *Facets*, 6(1), pp.871-911.

and suicide. Higher education for Indigenous students must contribute towards life-long learning, wisdom, and their right to freely pursue economic cultural, and social development, and self-determination.

4. Collaboration in education is a meaningful step towards reconciliation. Overcoming the injustice perpetuated in the name of education including physical and sexual abuse and death requires dedicated action and commitment to the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Calla to Action](#).
5. Indigenous worldview and knowledges will play a key role in building sustainable practices and addressing climate change. The concept of sustainability is not new to Indigenous people. The Indigenous view of sustainability is embedded in the concept of collective responsibility to nurture the land while using only that what is needed for sustenance. Shifts in higher education to recognize, respect and nurture Indigenous knowledges will make an essential contribution to this field of study and the protection of the planet.