



RESPONDING TO THE TRC CALLS TO ACTION: ASSESSING NEEDS FOR INDIGENOUS CURRICULA

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INTRODUCTION

The research and learning for this report was conducted on the unceded and occupied territories of the xwməθkwəyəm, Skwxwú7mesh, Səlilwətaʔ/Selilwitulh, and kʷikʷəłəm Nations. Kimberley John of the shishálh Nation and Treena Chambers, a member of the Métis Nation of British Columbia, are the primary authors for this work. Guiding our work as researchers, we want to acknowledge that we live and learn as guests on xwməθkwəyəm, Skwxwú7mesh, Səlilwətaʔ/Selilwitulh, and kʷikʷəłəm territories. In our roles as researchers, we strive to act as good relations and acknowledge that our presence here acts to dispossess the traditional Nations who are the caretakers of these lands and waterways. We strive to have our contributions begin a dialogue that leads to deeper and more profound acts of reconciliation that can inform settler populations. We base reconciliation on an awareness of Indigenous perspectives of the historical influences that shape current relationships. We thank those who shared their knowledge with us and stand open to correction.

This report is one component of a larger project called INDG-Online, in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action to Indigenize curricula. As Chair of the TRC, Senator Murray Sinclair stated in a 2016 keynote, the lack of curricula about Indigenous history, especially

residential schools, has to be seen "as a Canadian problem. Education has been used to harm everybody...Education holds the key to reconciliation. It is where our country will heal itself."

INDG-Online, funded by the Aboriginal Strategic Initiative (ASI), is creating ways to allow interested learners to access Indigenous curricula. The courses range from a microcredit through which students earn one-unit learning about a specific topic such as treaties, up to the completion of an online research certificate and/or online minor in the Department of Indigenous Studies (INDG).

INDG-Online includes both pre-existing INDG courses and new content designed to respond directly to the Calls to Action. While all courses are available to SFU students, the microcredit courses can also be completed for professional development for members of the wider community. Accordingly, this report focuses on assessing the need for, and interest in, such online training that can provide specialized Indigenous content and be a low-barrier educational opportunity for a diversity of audiences.

INTENTIONS AND IMPACT

This report was built upon the work by Kimberley John, who initially gathered contact information about local healthcare providers. This project was then expanded to include interviews conducted by John and Chambers with workers in the education sector (K-12 and post-secondary), the resource extraction industry, construction industry, as well as various crown corporations including BC Ferries and BC Hydro. John and Chambers also interviewed seniors currently enrolled in SFU Continuing Studies Liberal Arts and 55+ program. The intention behind this report is to understand the needs of, and highlight groups and professionals for whom courses with Indigenous content, specifically microcredit courses, could contribute to their professional, as well as personal, development. Many of the individuals and groups surveyed were able to identify the value of information contained in courses that centered Indigenous perspectives, and recognized how the courses could enhance both their professional and personal endeavours.

John and Chambers are graduate students in the SFU Master's in Public Policy program. They approached this research with care and drew on their commitment to decolonization, equity, and justice, along with their knowledge and experience in policy to inform this paper. The intended impact of this work is to provide educational opportunities to professionals in order to move their workplaces towards acting in right relations with Indigenous communities.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

To build better relationships with individuals and communities, there must be a better understanding of the structural racism which is rooted in Canada's current and historical policies. These have reinforced widespread marginalization of Indigenous peoples primarily through a singular piece of legislation, the *Indian Act* (1876), which was purportedly created to protect the rights of Indigenous people but in reality has been used as a blunt tool of attempted assimilation and genocide. The practices and institutions created in service of this federal structure have done intergenerational harm to all Indigenous peoples in Canada; these histories are generally not public knowledge. To understand the current realities of Indigenous communities, one must understand the history of the violation of land treaties, Indian Residential Schools, Indian hospitals, and the state of Indigenous child welfare in Canada.

Canada's colonial education system has created a vacuum of public knowledge where Indigenous persons are concerned. This ongoing practice of neglect has generated a deep

resentment towards Indigenous groups that is reinforced by widespread ignorance of Indigenous treaty rights, untruthful descriptions of colonial history, and the misrepresentation of Indigenous persons in widespread media. It is important to remember that the rights to land, health, and humanitarian treatment have not been gifted to Indigenous communities but have been removed from them systematically over the course of colonial history.

CURRENT CONTEXT

Indigenous peoples have been stewards of their territories for thousands of years. For the past century, they have fought for the protection of their lands and the species that inhabit them. Indigenous peoples have been subjected to environmental racism, systemic laws and regulations that favour resource extraction and manufacturing, that cause unmeasurable damage to the environment. Pollution, physical imposition, and relocation of Indigenous communities has adversely affected the physical health and mental well-being of many First Nations. Destruction of hunting, fishing, trapping areas and plant life affects the food security of these communities and damages traditional practices and culture. Companies that have largely ignored the rights of Indigenous communities now need to redress the harm they created; these institutions need to learn how to engage and negotiate with communities in order to move forward together in projects that benefit all parties in ways that honour Indigenous sovereignties.

Spurred by news stories surrounding Residential Schools in the summer of 2021, an opportunity for conversation has opened. Settler-Canadians have been forced to acknowledge what Indigenous peoples have always known: residential schools were less about education and primarily about the control of Indigenous bodies and destruction of cultural ties. Many Indigenous children who were forced into the residential 'school' system died, and their deaths remained an open 'secret' held by the survivor communities. Survivors of this violent colonial project have been sharing stories in community, of missing friends and relatives and graveyards since residential schools were implemented by the Canadian government. Only now, when we have seen coverage of graveyards being acknowledged in mainstream news sources, are we beginning to see an acknowledgment in the wider community that Indigenous 'stories' carry a history that has been at best tokenized and at worst dismissed.

Deeper understanding of Indigenous experiences in relation to the State can reveal the impact of Canada's colonial systems. A shared understanding must be built on history that includes Indigenous perspectives. Indigenous-designed,

microcredit courses offer an opportunity to meet this need. As the [Truth and Reconciliation Report](#) tells us, “too many Canadians know little or nothing about the deep historical roots of Indigenous presence and history on these lands.” We also see in recent work by Cherokee scholar Daniel Health Justice and historian Sean Carleton the need for “[Truth Before Reconciliation](#)”, the need for settler-Canadians to proactively engage in (un)learning, confront the atrocities of colonialism, and honour Indigenous truth-telling in order to take accountability and work towards redressing injustices.

We have seen unprecedented interest in challenging dominant understandings of history. High-profile Canadian actor [Dan Levy](#), for instance, encouraged people to enroll in an online introductory Indigenous Studies course initiated by the [University of Alberta’s Native Studies program](#). More than 64,000 people took-up his call to action. Similarly, microcredit courses offer SFU an opportunity to reach a diversity of learners and engage them in these conversations.

In 2016, Canada finally moved to endorse the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples \(UNDRIP\)](#) after almost a decade of rejecting the recommendations supported by 144 other countries. The Declaration sets forth a basic framework of standards to protect and strengthen the culture, rights, and standards of living for Indigenous peoples. It is to be used as a tool to promote social and economic development as well as combat discrimination and human rights violations. This is one of the first small steps Canada has taken on its pathway towards reconciliation.

It is clear not enough has been done to implement systemic change. A [report](#) prepared for The National Collaborating Center for Indigenous Health (2014-2020) examines the phenomenon of anti-Indigenous racism in Canada and the effects that it has on the health and well-being of individuals and communities. Racism occurs at an individual as well as a structural level, and is pervasive throughout all of Canada’s health, social, economic, and governing institutions.

In 2020, the Ministry of Health commissioned an independent review of the healthcare system in order to address allegations of racism and discrimination directed at Indigenous peoples seeking care. The report, released in November of 2020, showed that “[systemic racism] was widely acknowledged by many within the healthcare system, [resulting] in a range of negative impacts, harm, and even death” (p. 2). This report demonstrates that any efforts to combat this stereotyping and prejudice against Indigenous peoples are inconsistent, and have not been structurally implemented in our healthcare system (p. 2).

In December 2020, Bill C-15 was introduced in the House of Commons, with intention of transforming the resolutions of UNDRIP into law in Canada. In June 2021 Bill C-15 received

Royal Assent. In order for UNDRIP to be implemented and also its values integrated into all facets of society, professional and service sectors must become aware of legal and political responsibilities to Indigenous peoples, and change accordingly.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The institutions that were targeted for our research and environmental scan were ones that we perceived as having the most immediate need. We sought to discover if these sectors included pertinent Indigenous content as part of their professional development requirements. We recognize that SFU can supplement in-house course development to create curricula to address this gap.

Our environmental scan showed that many healthcare organizations, such as local health authorities and nursing associations, as well as other private and public workplaces, have limited opportunities for professional development on Indigenous issues. For example, both a representative from a Human Resources department and a senior manager in a Canada-wide construction company spoke of targeted training that was offered to individuals who would be in contact with Indigenous communities. However, both identified the desire by many employees who were not offered this targeted training to access more professional development in order to develop a deeper understanding of issues impacting Indigenous peoples

Many mining and resource extraction companies are headquartered in British Columbia. They work with the BC First Nations Energy and Mining Council (FNEMC). The FNEMC works to ensure that companies respect Indigenous communities in order to preserve the land for future generations. Interviews with individuals in two key corporations indicated that access to information about Indigenous perspectives on treaties and history could help to facilitate a stronger working relationship with the FNEMC. As well, one individual identified education as a potential support in their work with other Indigenous communities outside the borders of what we currently call Canada.

We also looked at private clinics and community organizations that specialize in helping specific demographics such as youth, adults, women, and LGBTQIA/2S persons. These organizations tend to have Indigenous specific information on their websites and often had accessible contact information.

However, when we examined the professional development opportunities listed on the websites of hospitals that are funded privately and publicly through and under the direction of health authorities, we found very little content

that was Indigenous-specific, either on social determinants of health for Indigenous persons or on the delivery of culturally-appropriate care for them. Despite the healthcare system's recognition of its inadequacies, there continues to be a lack of understanding of systemic issues impacting Indigenous peoples that affect health in all life stages: pre and postnatal care; early childhood; adult and senior. This neglect is concerning and creates a lack of trust for healthcare providers, which must be rectified.

Similarly, we looked at the websites for the municipal governments of Surrey, Vancouver, and Burnaby, especially since there are large Indigenous populations in these cities. We noted that all websites included information about Indigenous events. We also interviewed municipal workers, and we found that there is uneven knowledge about issues impacting Indigenous communities. City of Vancouver workers in the permits department had little exposure to Indigenous-centered training. While they were trained in the language of land acknowledgements, they did not have specialized training. While they could say Vancouver was on unceded territory, they were not able to point to why this was. Knowledge varied from person to person. Most knowledge acquisition was self-directed and limited. Employees that work for the Vancouver's Parks Board who we interviewed showed a deep understanding of Indigenous issues. They identified acquiring more knowledge from Indigenous perspectives as an important future goal. City of Burnaby workers had little exposure to information about Indigenous perspectives and experiences. In fact, many of the interviews developed into a deeper conversation on Indigenous issues in the municipality because the interviewees were enthusiastic but lacking information. Given the location of SFU's main campus, there is an opportunity for SFU to partner with the City of Burnaby to offer Indigenous-centered classes to City staff as part of their professional development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Issues of racism, marginalization, gendered colonial violence, police brutality, and systemic oppression have come up repeatedly in the healthcare system, the justice system, environmental disputes, housing, social services, and public education. By highlighting how Canada's colonial legacy directly and persistently affects Indigenous peoples, there is an opportunity to challenge common stereotypes and harmful preconceptions. Educating professionals can contribute to the ending of the perpetuation of harmful behaviours and beliefs. Indigenous curriculum, particularly microcredit courses, can help to educate those who are employed in private and public sectors and have direct or indirect contact with Indigenous groups or individuals. This includes SFU's own staff and faculty.

SFU students nearing the end of their degrees, who find

themselves one or two credits short, see microcredit courses as both an interesting and efficient way to complete their degrees. This assessment is reinforced by conversations in a Facebook group called "Must Know for Courses at SFU", where students identified microcredit courses as a means for fulfilling their requirements for graduation.

The work study program at SFU is highly regarded. Many employers who offer student placements would benefit from students who have been exposed to Indigenous Studies. A number of students said they felt they were ill-prepared to consider issues that affected Indigenous populations during their co-ops. While all students would benefit, these courses would be especially valuable to students who are placed in governmental positions, positions within resource extraction industries, engineering companies, and organizations that provide social services.

Currently, there is often no requirement for students to seek education or training that focus on Indigenous realities and perspectives. This means that these students, often moving into managerial positions, do so with only colonial perspectives on issues directly impacting Indigenous peoples. Accordingly, professional programs at SFU are another place where students could benefit from exposure to Indigenous perspectives on topics such as residential schools and treaties.

Finally, we recognize that Indigenous peoples are the knowledge holders and experts on matters impacting their communities. We are also aware that SFU is an established academic institution occupying stolen lands, and thus, it has its own responsibilities towards redressing harm. As First Nations (re)build their governing capacity, and urban Indigenous groups organize to meet the needs of their constituents, they will require training opportunities. SFU can demonstrate tangible support by offering microcredit courses at no cost.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

All online courses should be accessible. Captioning or translating the courses into other languages could help meet the needs of diverse populations in Canada, which includes immigrant and migrant racialized communities. This cannot be done with a purely automatic translation system as many of these systems mis-translate words, which can be particularly problematic given that the issues and ideas being translated are sensitive or contested even in English. Also, SFU¹ can act ethically by offering accessible educational opportunities on a sliding-scale so that this content can reach a wide audience.

Online Indigenous courses are important; however, they are limited. Offering Indigenous content for professional development is not so that institutions and corporations can “red-wash” their reputations. Instead, Indigenizing curricula is a response to the TRC’s calls to action for systemic change.

¹Note that even the name of this Institution challenges the idea of reconciliation.



Authors Treena Chambers (left) & Kimberley John (Right)

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[***Link to database excel spreadsheet***](#)