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► POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION IN CANADA: A RESPONSE TO THE TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION OF CANADA

Vianne Timmons, President and Vice-Chancellor, University of Regina and Peter Stoicheff, President and Vice-Chancellor, University of Saskatchewan

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On June 2, 2015, Justice Murray Sinclair released the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's (TRC) 94 Calls to Action. It was a landmark moment in truth telling and reconciliation between Aboriginal¹ and non-Aboriginal people in our country, and one at which many Canadians joined those who had already been mobilized around supporting Aboriginal peoples in Canada.

Many universities responded to the Calls to Action by making public statements and looking inward at their institutions. This introspection was necessary and needs to continue. But most importantly, there needs to be action taken on multiple fronts in universities across Canada.

Simply put, one cannot dispute the post-secondary educational gap that exists between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal youth – a gap that has been caused in many cases by funding deficiencies as well as deeply rooted social and economic issues within Aboriginal communities resulting from Canada's treatment of Aboriginal people over the past 150 years. According to the 2006 Census, a significant difference in university completion rates was noted between

¹ This article uses the term "Aboriginal" whenever possible in order to respect and remain consistent with the TRC's usage in its Calls to Action.

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal adults. This had not changed much by the 2011 Census. It reported less than half (48%) of Aboriginal people aged 25 to 64 had a post-secondary qualification. By comparison, about two thirds (65%) of non-Aboriginal people in the same age group had a postsecondary qualification, a difference of 17 percentage points. The policy issue is how universities in Canada can become part of the solution that addresses the deeply rooted social and economic challenges faced by many Aboriginal people.

► Barriers to Aboriginal education

Significant research identifies barriers to success for Aboriginal people in post-secondary education, as well as factors that contribute to success (e.g., Preston, 2016; Timmons et al., 2009). The findings provide ideas for specific initiatives to support Aboriginal students once they enter post-secondary institutions. As indicated in the TRC Calls to Action, and as demonstrated by the Martin Aboriginal Education Initiative begun in 2008 by the Right Honourable Paul Martin (Martin Aboriginal Education Initiative, 2016), support needs to be provided much earlier for the post-secondary educational gap to be closed. This is important for all to recognize; however in this Policy Brief, post-secondary education will be the focus.

Institutions such as Cape Breton University, Trent University, the University of Winnipeg, the University of Saskatchewan and the University of Regina with its 40-year-old federated college First Nations University of Canada – to name but a few – have been focused on educating Aboriginal students for many years. Some of the initiatives that have been shown to be successful at these different institutions are transition programs, cohort groups of students, Aboriginal student centres, Elders-in-residence, and curriculum and pedagogy reflective of Aboriginal history, culture and beliefs (Preston, 2016; Timmons et al., 2009).

In addition, to contribute to the process of Indigenization, many institutions are incorporating practices that honour and show respect for Aboriginal peoples and their culture. In many cases, universities are setting aside their secular principles to permit Aboriginal prayers by Elders to open public events. It is an accommodation that recognizes historic grievances, and a practice not common for other religious beliefs. Other practices include: holding traditional ceremonies; acknowledging traditional territories and Treaty lands at meetings and events; opening long houses and Aboriginal centres; naming or re-naming buildings in Aboriginal languages; and providing greetings in Aboriginal languages.

These activities – modest as they may be in the grand scheme of things – would have been rare to see a decade ago, but are now becoming far more common. In fact, while developing a newly released searchable database of programs and services for Aboriginal students, their families and communities, Universities Canada determined that there has been a more than 30% increase in Aboriginal programming at universities in recent years.

Since 2009, Universities Canada has provided opportunities for university presidents to learn and share best practices in areas including promotion of access and success for Aboriginal students, the role of universities in promoting reconciliation, and Indigenous scholarship. In 2015, the organization released a set of principles, the first of which calls for “institutional commitment at every level to develop opportunities for Indigenous students.”

Going even further, one of the TRC report’s Calls to Action states: “We call upon the federal government to develop with Aboriginal groups a joint strategy to eliminate educational and employment gaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians.”

► Partnership is Critical

As universities look to develop strategies to support Aboriginal students, it is critical to do so in meaningful partnership with Aboriginal peoples. For too long, the push has been to “do for” or “do to”; now it needs to be to “do by and do with”. This is well-recognized by most institutions – primarily due to the mobilization and advocacy of Aboriginal peoples rather than the benevolence or far-sightedness of universities – and structures such as Aboriginal Advisory Circles and Aboriginal Councils are now being introduced with more regularity than ever before.

Clearly, to enhance Aboriginal post-secondary participation, lower high school achievement and completion rates need to be addressed. Equally important, however, is funding for post-secondary education. Currently, only “status Indians” are eligible to receive federal funding support for university, and there has been a cap on the federal funding since 1996. Annual increases have been limited to two per cent, which is often lower than annual university tuition increases. Even if a student is eligible for the federal funding, the funding is decided and distributed at the community level. As a result, in many communities there is simply not enough funding available to support the growing number of students who wish to pursue a university education. In 2009, for example, more than 5,000 eligible Aboriginal students could not access federal funding for their post-secondary education (Laboucane, 2010).

Communities often have guidelines that students may find challenging, such as maintaining a certain grade point average, specific course load, and certain attendance criteria. These are not illegitimate conditions, but need to be taken into account in efforts to accommodate and advance Aboriginal education. Another challenge is that a community may focus on students who are recent high school graduates, leaving mature learners without funding support.

There are multiple other barriers Aboriginal students uniquely face. Many live in the north, with no or minimal access to university education in their home communities or regions. Students often have to relocate to attend university, and end up leaving their support networks behind. It also is very expensive to leave the north and live in the south. In addition, students often find it challenging to obtain the funding to go home for holidays and summer. There are few jobs for students in their home communities, so they do not have the opportunity to save for school. In summary, the financial obstacles and lack of support students from our north experience are significant. Geography and finances can also pose barriers to post-secondary access for non-Aboriginal students, but coupled with the legacies of colonialism, such limits to access can be heightened for Aboriginal students.

Another Call to Action from the TRC is requiring “the federal government to eliminate the discrepancy in federal education funding for First Nations children being educated on reserves and those First Nations children being educated off reserves”. This highlights the importance of all Aboriginal people being treated fairly. A first principle in education should state that where you live should not have a significantly negative impact on either access to or support for education.

Partly in an attempt to increase awareness of these and many other related issues, some universities have begun to look at how they can ensure all students are educated about Aboriginal history and culture. This is being done in a variety of ways. In some post-secondary institutions such as the University of Regina, individual faculties such as Education and Arts have implemented their own graduation requirement for a course in Indigenous knowledge.

The University of Winnipeg has gone even further by passing a requirement that all graduating students take a course that focuses on Indigenous knowledge.

As much as these initiatives align with the TRC recommendations, they do not fulfill two key ones – that medical and nursing schools require their students to take a course dealing with Aboriginal health issues, and that law schools require their students to take a course in Aboriginal people and the law. Medical, nursing and law schools across Canada must now make it a priority to make these courses mandatory for their students.

► Indigenization of curriculum

A greater challenge is to infuse curriculum with Indigenous knowledge across all faculties and subject areas. Many faculty members feel they do not have the background to undertake this; and in some cases, when non-Indigenous faculty do believe they have the background, their Indigenous colleagues disagree. To help address this, universities have been hiring and/or identifying leaders on their campuses to support initiatives in revising their curriculum.

Another TRC Call to Action is: “We call upon post-secondary institutions to create university and college degree and diploma programs in Aboriginal languages”. In the 2011 Census more than 60 Aboriginal languages were identified, although there were very few people overall who self-identified as fluent speakers of these languages (213,500). Given this situation, it will be a challenge for universities both to teach these Aboriginal languages themselves, and to find qualified instructors in a variety of disciplines to teach in these languages. More than 30 Aboriginal languages are currently being taught at Canadian universities, but many Aboriginal language courses have low enrolments, so universities will have to make a special effort to ensure they continue to be offered.

In 2010, the Deans of Education in Canada released an Accord on Indigenous Education (Archibald et al., 2010). Their Accord aligns with the TRC’s subsequent “call to action” to “Provide the necessary funding to post-secondary institutions to educate teachers on how to integrate Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods into classrooms.” In the Accord, the Deans of Education commit to “engage[ing] learners in experiencing the Indigenous world and Indigenous knowledge in a holistic way”. They also agree to “promote the development of culturally responsive curricula and to infuse Indigenous content and ways of knowing into all curricula at all levels”. In doing so, they took the lead nationally, even before the release of the TRC’s Calls to Action, to transform Teacher Education programs.

Many Canadian universities have recognized the importance of Elders as knowledge keepers, cultural advisors and supporters of students, with the result that having Elders on campus is becoming more and more commonplace, and some universities are beginning to create Elders’ Councils. Some universities have

set up offices for community Elders and provided remuneration for their time. Institutions such as Vancouver Island University have made it a priority to establish faculty positions for Elders. In such positions, Elders help educate members of the Academy on culturally appropriate practices, provide advice on curriculum and policies, and share traditional Indigenous knowledge that has often been excluded by universities.

Supporting Aboriginal students and incorporating cultural practices on a campus may require policy changes. Smudging is practised in many institutions, for example, and there is often space designated for the activity. Most Aboriginal ceremonies have food, and universities often have restrictions on which organizations can cater on campus. As a result, feasting and food preparation for Aboriginal events may require special consideration and accommodation.

For a campus to truly reflect society, Aboriginal faculty and staff need to be visible and actively involved in the life of the institution. To that end, universities have implemented programs to recruit and retain Aboriginal faculty and staff. This is, and will continue to be, an important focus as long as Aboriginal people are under-represented in our post-secondary workforce.

Over the decades there has been a lot of research in Aboriginal communities by Canadian scholars. As that work continues, there is a movement to ensure that a separate ethics approval process exists for research with Aboriginal peoples, and that the First Nations Information Governance Centre’s principles of OCAP® (Ownership, Control, Access and Possession, and originally established in 1998) govern research undertakings whenever possible. The Assembly of First Nations of Canada has produced the document “First Nations Ethics Guide on Research and Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge” (2005) to inform such research. In addition, the Tri-Council funding agencies of SSHRC, NSERC and CIHR have developed guidelines for “Research Involving the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples of Canada” (2014).

Just as importantly, the Government of Canada has established a Panel on Research Ethics which states: “Respect for, and accommodation of, First Nations, Inuit and Métis priorities on joint ownership of the products of research and maintaining access to data for community use should guide research practices”. Historically, much of the research undertaken in Aboriginal communities or with Aboriginal people was done by non-Aboriginal scholars with little to no sense that the research was a shared undertaking – an example of colonialism at work in academia. As we see more Aboriginal professors in our universities – and more consideration given to research ethics and methodology at the institutional and national levels – this is changing for the better and is an example of decolonialism at work in academia.

As the TRC “calls to action” such as the one below are implemented, research will play a critical role in reconciliation:

We call upon the federal government, through the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, and in collaboration with Aboriginal peoples, post-secondary institutions and educators, and the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation and its partner institutions, to establish a national research program with multi-year funding to advance understanding of reconciliation.

► Universities must lead

No one should underestimate the scale of what it will take to close the gap in Aboriginal education outcomes. In many ways, the Academy is being challenged like never before to adapt and embrace change for social progress. There are many aspects to indigenizing the Academy, and as a result, universities need a multi-pronged approach. Leadership is critical. Many of our country's university presidents have made a commitment to supporting Aboriginal students. The Academy needs to hear the voices of its members who have long been advocating for change, and the TRC Calls to Action will accelerate that change.

Canadian universities are poised to undertake the initiatives necessary to improve post-secondary access and success for our Aboriginal students. It is undoubtedly critical to continue investing in the K-12 system, but it is equally important to support students at the post-secondary level. Educating one generation will invariably lead to the education of the next, and with the TRC Calls to Action in hand, there has never been a more opportune time for us to effect this transformation. The momentum is growing, and the key is now to ensure a continued and comprehensive effort.

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Dr. Vianne Timmons

As President of the University of Regina, Dr. Timmons oversees the degree programs of close to 15,000 undergraduate and graduate students. Since becoming President in September 2008, she has played an active role in shaping the strategic direction of the University, with a strong focus on community relationships, internationalization, and Aboriginal education. Originally from Atlantic Canada, she is of Mi'kmaq heritage.



Peter Stoicheff

Peter Stoicheff is President and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Saskatchewan. Peter holds an undergraduate degree in English and history from Queen's University (1978) and a PhD in literature from the University of Toronto (1983). An active scholar throughout his career, he is highly regarded internationally for his work on modern literature, and his exploration of the history of the book and its future in a digital age.

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