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Canada

Decolonizing Work Readiness Programs for Urban Indigenous Youth Research Report (2024)

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Academic Researchers

Dr. Heidi Weigand
Dr. Daphne Rixon
Dr. Kristin Williams

Research Assistants

Diana Serban
Denise Hinds
Jessica Hepworth
Erica Weigand

Mi'kmaq Native Friendship Centre, Halifax, Nova Scotia

Pamela Glode-Desrochers
Trina Empringham

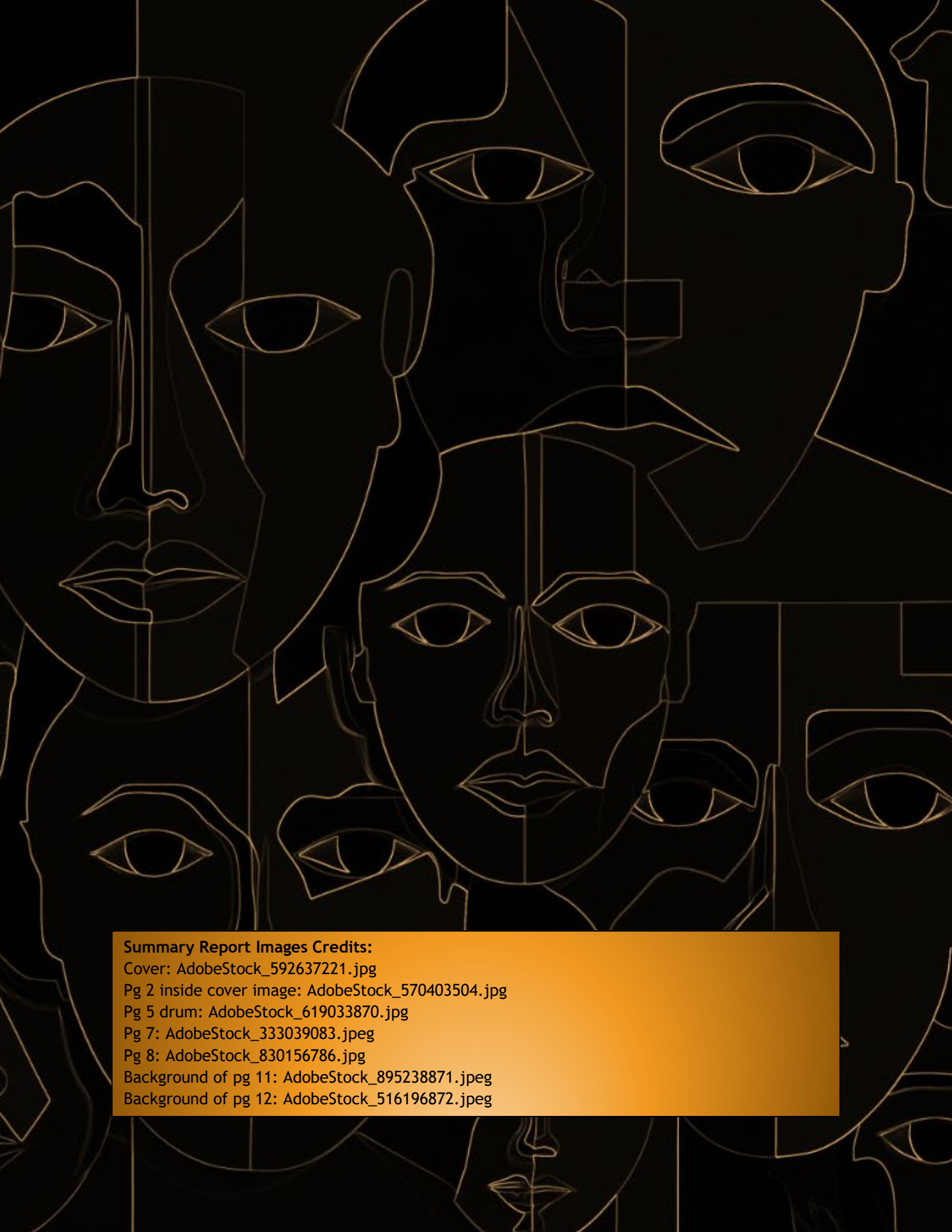
First Light Friendship Centre, St John's, Newfoundland and Labrador & Labrador

Justin Campbell
Chad Bedard

wije'winen



Mi'kmaq Native
FRIENDSHIP CENTRE



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PURPOSE

The overarching purpose of this study is to explore how educational institutions and workplace readiness programs have decolonized their learning spaces for the delivery of education, training, and programs aimed at increasing the number of Indigenous youths preparing for the workplace or entrepreneurial pursuits. The study involves collaboration with the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre (MNFC), Halifax, Nova Scotia, and the First Light Native Friendship Centre (FLNFC), St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) to gather the needs of urban Indigenous youth, living in Halifax, NS and St John's, NL, needs from workplace readiness programs to help them enter the workforce.

OBJECTIVES

This study involves three phases, each with a specific objective.

1. Gather insights from Canadian university research ethics boards to understand methods and practices employed to decolonize the ethics application process based on First Nations protocols regarding ownership, control, acceptance, and possession (OCAP®).
2. Explore barriers and enablers for urban Indigenous youth to prepare and engage in the workforce.
3. Explore how organizations offering workplace readiness programs engage in decolonization efforts to help engage and prepare Urban Indigenous Youths for the workplace.

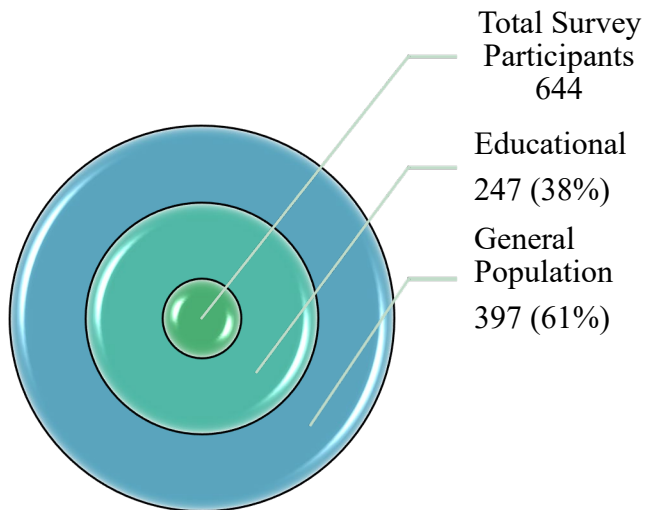
INTRODUCTION

According to the National Indigenous Economic Development Board (NIEDB, 2016), investing in Indigenous education, skills, and training would boost Canada's economy by 1.5%. From 2016 to 2021, the Indigenous population grew by 9.5%, nearly twice the growth rate (5.3%) of the non-Indigenous population over the same period. The Indigenous population in Canada is also much younger— in 2021, 41.2% of the Indigenous population was under age 25 compared to 27.3% of the non-Indigenous population (Statistics Canada, 2021). Investing in Indigenous youth is critical for growing the Canadian economy. We all share the responsibility to help restore this prosperity by advancing the objectives of economic reconciliation as recommended by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Melvin, 2023; Anderson, 2021). Eliminating

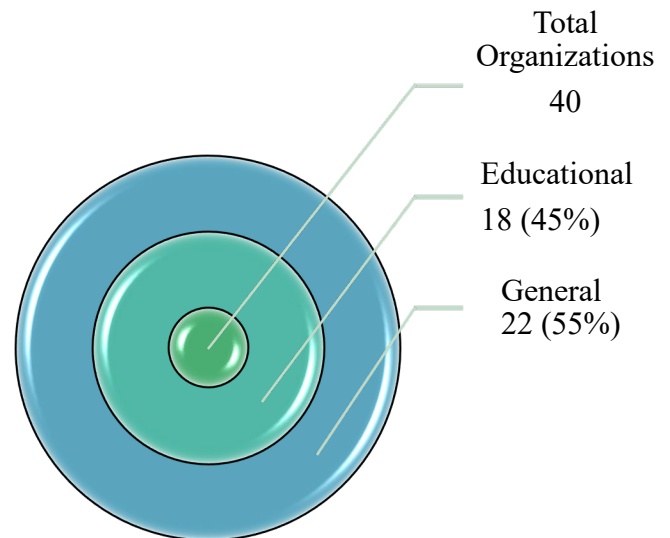
Indigenous Canadians' educational and employment gaps was one of the 94 calls to action outlined in the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation final report (NCTR, 2015). According to the 2021 Census data, there are over 1.5 Indigenous people aged 15 - 25 (entering the workforce age) for every Indigenous person aged 55 - 64 (exiting the workforce age). There is a growing opportunity to understand the specific needs of this new generation of workers focused on climate change and sustainability. Decolonizing educational systems and skills training programs can help limit the disparities urban Indigenous youth experience regarding employment and education. Material, psychological, epistemological and spiritual forms of Indigenous sovereignty must be appreciated and respected to decolonize.

DEMOGRAPHICS

SURVEY PARTICIPANTS



ORGANIZATIONS



UNDERSTANDING DECOLONIZATION

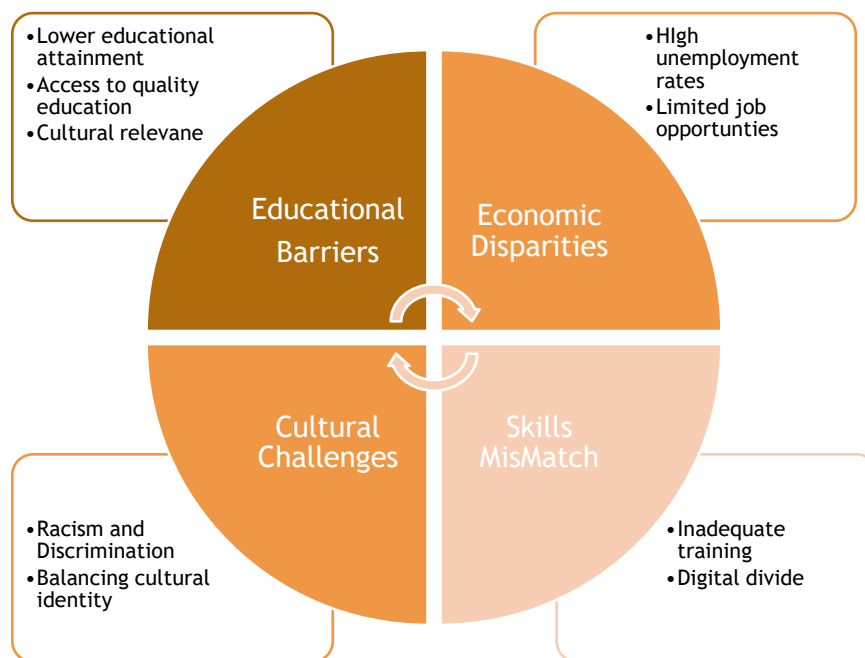
Decolonization is a common goal among many colonized countries; however, the processes required to 'decolonize' are not consistently understood. Some suggest that decolonization requires resisting and dismantling colonization and revaluing Indigenous knowledge

Nakagawa (2021) contends that the process of decolonization must include delegitimizing and dismantling all colonial legacies, structures and ideologies that place Western, Eurocentric ideologies over Indigenous knowledge. However, it is precisely these systems that many Indigenous communities heavily rely on.

- Beyond achieving political sovereignty, decolonization entails reclaiming cultural identity, economic autonomy, and social structures from the remnants of colonial influence.
- Economically, decolonization meant striving to develop self-sufficient economies free from the exploitative trade patterns established by colonial powers.
- Socially, it required addressing inequalities and divisions entrenched by colonial rule.

Decolonization represents not just a political shift but a profound and ongoing effort to rebuild nations on their terms.

BARRIERS TO URBAN INDIGENOUS YOUTH WORKFORCE PARTICIPATION



WAYS TO ADDRESS THESE CHALLENGES

Improving Education

Develop and fund programs that provide culturally relevant education and support for Indigenous students. Increase access to scholarships and bursaries for post-secondary education.

Economic Development

Support economic development initiatives within Indigenous communities and organizations to create more local job opportunities. Encourage partnerships between industries, Indigenous communities, and organizations to facilitate job training and placement.

Workplace Inclusivity

Implement anti-discrimination policies and promote diversity and inclusion training in workplaces. Create mentorship programs that connect Indigenous youth with

successful professionals in their fields of interest.

Mental Health Support

Provide mental health resources and support tailored to the needs of Indigenous youth. Encourage holistic approaches that incorporate traditional healing practices.

Role Models and Mentors

Promote the visibility of Indigenous professionals and leaders in various industries to inspire and guide youth. Establish mentorship programs that provide guidance and support.

Technology and Training

Increase access to technology and digital literacy programs in Indigenous communities. Provide vocational training and apprenticeships aligned with market needs.

STUDY HIGHLIGHTS

Our schools and public and private sector organizations are actively involved in helping urban Indigenous youth overcome the unique barriers and obstacles that they face. However, there are still concerns that decolonization practices in Atlantic Canadian workplace programs are somewhat limited in their growth and potential due to a lack of understanding of what it means to decolonize an organization to support these youths. Ensuring that Indigenous individuals and organizations are involved in the decolonizing process from the outset and following Indigenous-led practices is critical. There is a need to start working collaboratively and more focused on shifting the colonial approach to more culturally focused and supportive practices. This shift in urban contexts should include existing Friendship Centres because they are likely to engage youth early in their education and build a relationship and bond with them. These opportunities for partnering are the focus of our recommendations to support the needs of urban Indigenous youth to engage in the workforce in a meaningful and supportive approach.

KEY GAPS

Cultural sensitivity

Indigenous youth living in urban settings still need a connection to Indigenous culture and practices. Program dropout rates could be attributed to cultural differences and feeling overwhelmed, lost and not having support. As an example, Indigenous art on walls is a great start, but including the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action (TRC,2015) in the policies and practices of the organization demonstrates a commitment to creating comfortably safe spaces.

Indigenous representation in the workforce

The need for more Indigenous staff members and to have support in place for Indigenous people to feel safe and welcomed. The messaging should be inclusive and to work with Indigenous communities to acknowledge what is needed, which areas could be targeted and how to best advertise positions.

High School Diploma

One of the gaps is that many programs targeting people require a high school diploma for admission. It is essential to recognize that the lack of a high school diploma doesn't necessarily mean that they wouldn't be a great worker or wouldn't do well in a more hands-on environment. Therefore, exploring a different model, not necessarily a curriculum-based one, is beneficial, but more a hands-on apprentice-type learning.

Digital divide

Help applicants prepare a CV and assist with the initial steps of applying. Lack of consultation with Indigenous people in developing the application process. Since some people cannot access the internet and computers, they cannot complete the application forms.

COVID -19 IMPACT ON URBAN INDIGENOUS YOUTH



INNOVATION

COVID also helped to brainstorm ideas. It helped with online programming, such as the youth mentor training. Covid 19 had benefits since it forced the federal government, in general, to do things differently.

COST OF LIVING

During the pandemic, the rise in the price of living deeply impacted all their programs, particularly the housing team, due to the increased rental rates. This was compounded by the lack of increases in social assistance payments, which caused the homeless population to increase drastically.

RELATIONSHIPS

COVID-19 affected Indigenous engagement programs, in particular, the outreach programs to recruit Indigenous youth into the workforce. Communication was restricted to email which was a significant barrier to building the types of relationships needed to help Indigenous youth thrive in new jobs and workplaces.

COLLABORATE * EARLY OUTREACH * CULTURAL TRAINING

Work with non-Indigenous organizations on Indigenous awareness and create culturally safe spaces. Discuss the impacts of residential schools on individuals, families and communities. Work with non-Indigenous organizations, government, police, fire departments, and the military. Conduct workshops and courses for different organizations on different aspects of cultural awareness.

Have an Indigenous employee resource group. Start programs that are youth-oriented through outreach to the school systems. Focus on being present, talking to people, and building trust and relationships that are backed up by years of distrust and mistreatment.

Smaller training sessions are needed to interact better with members and be sensitive and aware of some issues. Provide space to host meetings for Indigenous organizations. Set aside three or four days for cultural training. Having a designated outreach person helps Indigenous people feel comfortable knowing that they can reach out with issues and that it stays confidential.

THE RESEARCH

This research project used a mixed methods approach to obtain more robust information using quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data was derived from an online/telephone survey. To supplement the data from the survey, we conducted semi-structured interviews with various community organizations that provide work readiness services. This mixed methodology approach enabled us to identify the perspectives of Indigenous youth regarding their work readiness and the organizations' perspectives that facilitate work readiness.

THE CRITICAL GAPS

CULTURAL COMPROMISE

Indigenous individuals exhibited a higher incidence of compromising their cultural values, beliefs and practices at work than the general population. Meanwhile, workplace knowledge about Indigenous cultures was highly valued, especially among females and Indigenous individuals.

EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM SUPPORT

Overall, the usage of employment support programs is relatively low. However, Indigenous individuals tend to access the programs at a higher rate compared to the general population.

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

Identify more private sector employers in the trades area who are willing to hire Indigenous youth. These companies should be encouraged to appoint an Indigenous Affairs Liaison to coordinate recruitment and retention.

EDUCATIONAL DECOLONIZATION PROGRESS RESULTS

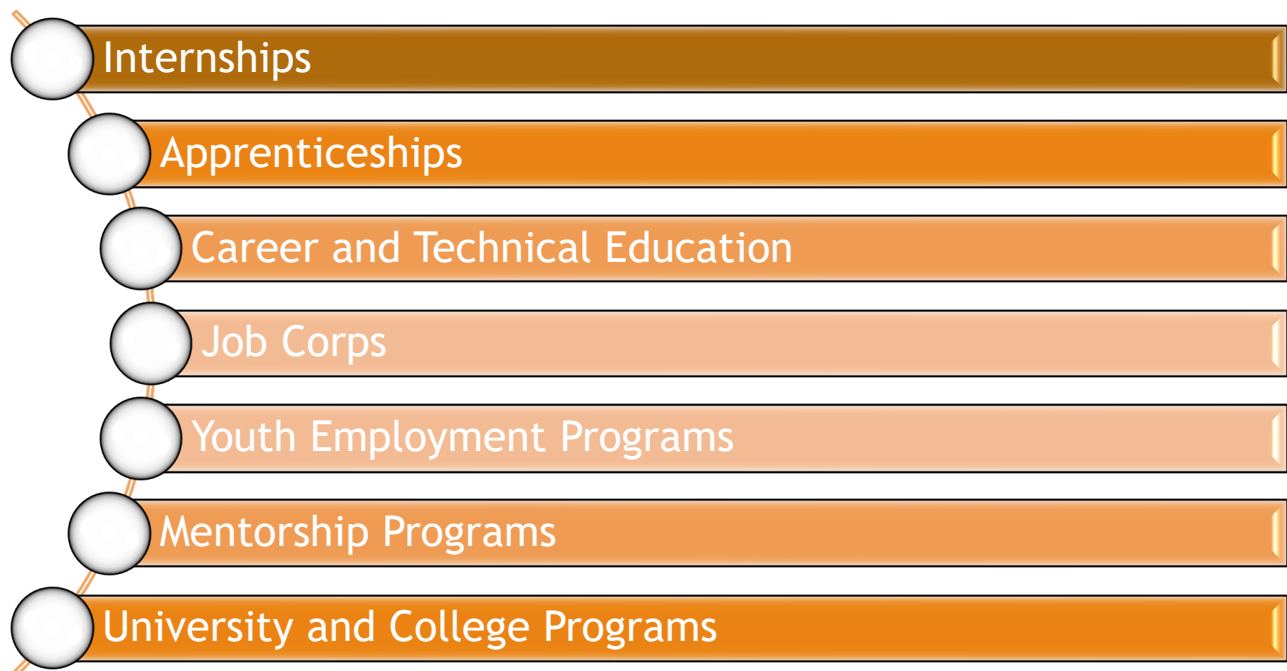
In the context of universities, decolonization involves recognizing and addressing how the university system has historically perpetuated colonial power dynamics and working to create a more inclusive, equitable, and respectful learning environment that reflects Indigenous knowledge and perspectives. This can involve changes to curriculum and research practices and addressing issues related to access and inclusion for Indigenous students, faculty, and staff.

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KEYS TO SUCCESS

- Researchers must engage with the relevant community and determine the nature and extent of community engagement appropriate to the research.
- Community engagement should be collaborative and participatory when possible, and research should be relevant to community needs and priorities (York University, n.d.).
- Researchers must recognize and engage Indigenous organizations, service organizations, and communities of interest as communities (York University, n.d.).
- A community engagement plan must be developed and provided to the Research Ethics Board (REB) for review when proposing research involving Indigenous participants (York University, n.d.).
- Researchers must seek the engagement of formal community leaders for research projects on lands under the jurisdiction of Indigenous authorities, and community advice should be sought to determine appropriate recognition for the unique advisory role fulfilled by Elders or other recognized knowledge holders (York University, n.d.).
- Redress the historical context of research conducted in Indigenous communities without proper engagement and ensure that research conducted in Indigenous contexts benefits the community and extends the boundaries of knowledge while strengthening capacity building within the community (York University, n.d.).

WORKFORCE READINESS PROGRAMS



The Path to Decolonization for Workplace Programs

WHY FOCUS ON URBAN INDIGENOUS YOUTH?

- Closing the economic gap (e.g., employment) between Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth would contribute \$27.7 billion to the Canadian Gross Domestic Product (GDP).
- If there was an immediate closure of the gap it would produce a 1.5% increase in the GDP.
- The Indigenous population grew by 9.5% from 2016-2021 and the rate for the non-Indigenous population in the same period grew by 5.3%
- In 2021, 41% Indigenous population is under the age of 25 in comparison to the non-Indigenous which is 27.3%.
- Most employers in Atlantic Canada are currently experiencing structural labour and skills shortages due to the interplay of demographic factors and new productivity - boosting technologies.

- See full report for a list of references.

Atlantic Canada Employer Concerns

52% Atlantic
Canadian
Employers had
difficulty filling
job vacancies

I don't know
where to
recruit
Indigenous
Youth

Atlantic Canada
Employers were
concerned with
retention issues
of Indigenous
Youth.

Housing and
Transportation
are barriers to
recruitment &
retention.

Urban Indigenous Youth Workplace Feedback*

* Statistics are from the Newfoundland and Labrador study, see the full report for references

Employment Support

35% of Urban Indigenous youth (18-34) accessed employment support versus 11% for the general population

Cultural Compromise

29% of Urban Indigenous youth (18-34) felt they needed to compromise their cultural values in the workplace.
This highest for Indigenous females at 41.7%

Value of Cultural Knowledge

69% of Urban Indigenous youth (18-34) felt it was essential to learn about Indigenous cultures in the workplace vs. 62% in the general population
The was highest for Indigenous females (81%) and general population Females (78%).

Decolonizing Workplace Readiness Programs

Large Organizations: Build partnerships and practices to recruit and retain Urban Indigenous youth to fill the labour shortage gap.

Small and Medium Businesses: Outreach support. Assistance is needed from the provincial governments and education institutions to make the connection.

Include Culture in Policies

Embrace Cultural Practices

Learn about Indigenous Issues and Concerns

Apprenticeship

Adopt Two-Eyed Seeing Approach

Use Two-Eyed Seeing Approach

Partnership & Collaboration

Read Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action

Friendship Centres

Experience Indigenous Culture

Partner with Organizations

Hiring in Cohorts

Indigenous Organizations: Partnership support is needed to grow programs and offerings to help decolonize the workplace readiness programs and education supports.

SUMMARY

Many findings and comparisons between the Newfoundland, Labrador, and Nova Scotia studies provide insights into the current programming, practices, and attitudes to support urban Indigenous youth joining the workforce. Our schools and public and private sector organizations are actively involved in helping Indigenous youth overcome the unique barriers and obstacles that they face. Additionally, the role of Urban Indigenous Friendship Centres presents an opportunity to play a critical role in educating decolonization practices. There are, however, still concerns that decolonization practices in Atlantic Canadian workplace programs are somewhat limited in their growth and potential due to a lack of understanding of what it means to decolonize an organization to support Indigenous youth. In our research, we noted the importance of the rigour involved in the research ethics boards to decolonize their research practices by ensuring that Indigenous individuals are engaged in the research process from the outset and are following Indigenous-led practices such as OCAP® to safeguard the ownership, control, accessibility and protection of data resides with the Indigenous communities and organizations. Many organizations recognize the importance of engaging urban Indigenous youth in the workplace but lack the knowledge and practices to support these youths' workforce journeys.

While decolonization knowledge is critical to the success of urban Indigenous youth, there is strong potential to work collaboratively towards developing a shared understanding of what a decolonized workplace would look like by engaging Indigenous individuals and organizations. There is a need to start working more on shifting the colonial approach to more culturally focused and supportive practices. This shift should include existing Friendship Centres because they are likely to engage youth early in their education and build a relationship and trust bond with them. These opportunities for partnering are the focus of our recommendations to support the needs of urban Indigenous youth to engage in the workforce in a meaningful and supportive approach.