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Research Result Summaries

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### Indigenizing the Curriculum: From Challenges to Opportunities

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After an eight-year review of the destructive impact of the residential school system on Indigenous peoples, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) argued that the education sector should play a central role in bringing about reconciliation. Among its 94 Calls to Action, the group called on post-secondary institutions to deliberately and formatively “integrate Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods into classrooms” (TRC, 2015). This call, intended to forge a space for voices, ways of knowing, traditions, and values long silenced, was echoed by Universities Canada as they asked leaders at Canadian institutions to “close the education gap” and indigenize curricula “through responsive academic programming, support programs, orientations, and pedagogies” (Universities Canada, 2015).

Members of the post-secondary community have taken steps in working towards these goals with many having hired educational developers specifically tasked with supporting the Indigenization of curricula. This approach, while valuable, does come with challenges: many of the people hired into these positions are part-time or contract staff, and/or isolated and part of a one-person team tasked with having an impossible breadth of disciplinary and pedagogical knowledge. Researchers at the University of Alberta found that Canadian institutions have made little progress toward Indigenizing the academy (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018), findings similar to those of researchers in countries around the world that have undertaken efforts to decolonize curricula (Behari-Leak, 2019; Darlaston-Jones et al., 2014; McLaughlin & Whatmas, 2008).

The purpose of this research study was to collect and examine the breadth of responsibilities, perspectives, and experiences of educational developers working to support the Indigenization of curricula at Canadian post-secondary institutions; gain a better understanding of the challenges faced by this group as well as their perceived needs; and using the participants’ critical insights, draft recommendations on how this group might network nationally, distribute capacity, and mobilize long-lasting change.

Thirty-seven participants from universities (78.4%) and colleges (21.6%) across seven provinces participated in the survey. More than half of the respondents (59.5%) self-identified as educational developers, and the remaining as directors (8.1%), faculty members (24.3%), senior administrators (2.7%), and/or staff (5.4%), formally working to Indigenize curricula at their institutions. The majority of participants reported that they are considered permanent full-time (78.4%).

Though it was widely understood that the Indigenization of curriculum is a massive undertaking, most respondents indicated that supporting this effort is one part of an already large list of responsibilities relating to teaching and learning including instructional support, curriculum development, consultations, and support for the integration of educational technologies. Participants also noted changes to their positions’ responsibilities over time: 1) the role evolved with emphasis on the Indigenization of curriculum; 2) the role has evolved, but with focus on other general educational development responsibilities; and 3) the role has devolved away from Indigenization support since its inception.

More than half of the participants indicated that they were able to contribute to the Indigenization of curriculum with varying levels of accomplishments including the support of faculty through one-on-one or group consultations ( $n=8$ ); creating and delivering professional development workshops, programs, and/or webinars ( $n=6$ ); developing strategic plans ( $n=3$ ); contributing to programs in Indigenous studies ( $n=2$ ); and integrating Indigenous elements in a few curricula ( $n=2$ ).

Participants identified a number of barriers they experienced in trying to support the Indigenization of curricula:

- faculty and administrator resistance marked by a lack of interest and inability to see perceived value to Indigenizing curriculum;
- problems at the institutional level such as a lack of support, commitment, and prioritization from upper administrations;
- shifts in rhetoric with the writing of Indigenization plans and the hiring of just a few Indigenous faculty and staff rather than system-wide changes in hiring, policy, and governance; and
- heavy workload as educational developers juggle the support for Indigenization with other educational developer responsibilities, and/or are tasked with supporting an entire campus as the only educational developer with a focus on Indigenization.

Survey respondents identified a number of recommendations for institutions seeking to Indigenize curricula including:

- hiring additional Indigenous peoples or experts across all positions;
- ensuring Indigenous peoples are represented in leadership roles and on policy and governance committees;
- providing ongoing professional development opportunities for leaders and faculty;
- systematically encouraging buy-in at all levels;
- changing faculty and leadership mindsets, from their understanding and value of Indigenization, to their approach to Indigenization curriculum and pedagogy; and
- fostering stronger collaborations with Indigenous communities and the teaching and learning community.

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