



IAESC

Indigenous Advanced
Education & Skills Council

Indigenous Perspectives: Advancing Change in Higher Education

*Report and Calls to Action emerging from the event held during the 2022 UNESCO
World Higher Education Conference on May 17, 2022 in Barcelona, Spain*

CALLS TO ACTION

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Report copywriter: Patti Ryan, Southside Communications Inc.

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“Indigenous Perspectives: Advancing Change in Higher Education” Calls to Action, Indigenous Advanced Education and Skills Council, 2022

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Context

These Calls to Action stem from an event entitled “Indigenous Perspectives: Advancing Change in Higher Education” that was part of the [2022 United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization \(UNESCO\) World Higher Education Conference](#) held on May 17, 2022 in Barcelona, Spain. They are informed by centuries of experiences and efforts to realize what Indigenous education is, and are guided by speakers’ experiences, remarks and ideas.

The Calls to Action are addressed to the United Nations and its bodies and systems (such as the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and UNESCO), other international organizations (such as the International Labour Organization and the World Intellectual Property Organization), all 193 United Nations member states, Indigenous peoples and their representative organizations, scholars, and post-secondary institutions and leaders worldwide. They present the challenges that emerged at the event and calls on these states, organizations, leaders, decision-makers and funders to act.

The “Indigenous Perspectives: Advancing Change in Higher Education” event featured nearly 20 Indigenous knowledge experts from a variety of countries with interest and expertise in higher education—from languages to accreditation to decolonization and more. Among the presentations, some speakers documented their alienating experiences in mainstream higher education systems, others explained how centuries of colonization have shaped their country’s current educational systems to exclude Indigenous ways of knowing and knowledges. Still others discussed how persistent stereotypes of Indigenous people held by settlers continue to limit Indigenous people’s access to educational opportunities.

The Calls to Action emerged from this hybrid (virtual and in-person) circle that wove together Indigenous perspectives from around the globe. They call for a great shift in higher education for Indigenous peoples. The goal is to deconstruct colonial education systems that were designed narrowly—as closed systems—and rebuild them to include and place Indigenous knowledge systems within them. In doing so, higher education systems and institutions can lead to better outcomes for Indigenous people and all learners around the world. These actions will contribute to making real rights enshrined in the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) (1948) and the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#) (2007).

The Calls to Action in this report represent a continuation of a conversation started in October 2021 with the global [Virtual Circle on Indigenous Perspectives on Higher Education](#). At that time, it became clear that a broader range of Indigenous voices needed to be heard. This broadening was reflected in the event on “Indigenous Perspectives: Advancing Change in Higher Education” and the Calls to Action that stem from that event. These Calls to Action serve as a rallying point for those who are dedicated to and engaged in advancing change in the diverse and complex areas in higher education.

Acknowledging the Opportunity

UNESCO conferences have not traditionally included Indigenous perspectives as a regular agenda item, or Indigenous scholars as speakers. The Canadian Commission for UNESCO (CCUNESCO) partnered with Dr. Budd Hall and Dr. Rajesh Tandon, co-chairs of the UNESCO Chair in Community Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education to launch national and international consultations on the future of higher education. They considered it important to include Dr. Lorna Wánosts'a7 Williams, Chair of the First Peoples' Cultural Foundation and Professor Emerita in Indigenous Education, University of Victoria in British Columbia, Canada, in the conversations taking place. Dr. Williams, in turn, invited other scholars to join her. This, then, led to the organization of an Indigenous-led session at the 2022 UNESCO World Higher Education Conference and a larger, more inclusive event concurrent with the main conference, engaging in dialogue on Indigenous perspectives on higher education. The event provided an opportunity for a deeper, more Indigenous-centric dive into some of the broader issues that would be raised at the conference presentation.

The scholars who spoke at the “Indigenous Perspectives: Advancing Change in Higher Education” event came from places as wide ranging as Canada, the United States, New Zealand, India and Uganda. They acknowledged the importance of this landmark opportunity to share their perspectives with an international audience. We thank the leadership of the Indigenous Advanced Education and Skills Council for organizing and funding the event as well as the financial contribution of the Mastercard Foundation.

Calls to Action

The following Calls to Action seek to improve higher education for Indigenous people worldwide. They have been distilled from the obstacles, experiences and solutions discussed by speakers, many of which contained striking commonalities despite speakers' different locations, cultures and languages.

We call upon the United Nations (UN) and its bodies and systems, other international organizations, all 193 UN member states, Indigenous peoples and their representative organizations, scholars, and post-secondary institutions and leaders worldwide to recognize that Indigenous people continue to remain excluded from higher education because of many historical, complex and inter-related challenges. We demand that these entities make the constructive changes needed to ensure that leaders and decision-makers at every level can engage with these issues and the changes outlined below.

Systemic change

1. **We call upon the United Nations and its bodies to prepare a system-wide action plan to improve all aspects of Indigenous higher education.** This plan should be co-developed with Indigenous peoples and should address the fact that Indigenous people remain largely unrecognized and excluded from higher education around the world because of their cultures, languages, and backgrounds. This action plan should rectify the fact that even the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which preceded the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), overlooked Indigenous peoples, largely because of the intricacies and workings of the United Nations systems.

While UNESCO champions SDG 4-Education, it works primarily with member states, many of whom do not have the commitments or connections to Indigenous peoples that are needed to concretely include Indigenous perspectives in efforts to achieve Quality Education. UN bodies and organizations need an action plan to better engage with Indigenous higher education institutions, Indigenous peoples and their representative organizations, the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, the UN Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and the Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Issues with the goal of ensuring the inclusion of Indigenous people in SDG 4 and in the United Nations' and member states' work in this area.

Revitalizing Indigenous languages

Through the UN Decade of Indigenous Languages and through other local, regional, national and international networks, we call upon the United Nations, its bodies, systems and member states, and post-secondary education institutions worldwide to:

2. **Support, in partnership with Indigenous communities and Nations, the revitalization and reclamation of Indigenous languages.** Universities and colleges should develop curricula for teaching Indigenous languages and ensure that they are properly accredited, delivered, accountable and publicly funded. States and post-secondary education institutions need to create more connections to communities, pathways, and programs for learning Indigenous languages so more students can become fluent. All stakeholders should act in support of the implementation of the Global Action Plan of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages.
3. **Build capacity and support the certification and employment of new Indigenous language teachers.** Currently in some jurisdictions, there is a need to earn two degrees (one in languages and another in teaching), which may be too high a bar when languages urgently need to be reclaimed and revitalized. Accreditation bodies and post-secondary education institutions need to recognize and value Indigenous languages, traditional knowledge and community experience.
4. **Give Indigenous languages their own space in programming.** Western higher education institutions are highly siloed places. Subject areas such as linguistics or modern languages are not a natural home for Indigenous languages. They need their own space and need to be better integrated with other related programs, as well as incorporated throughout higher education curricula.

Decolonization and indigenization

We call upon the United Nations, its bodies, systems and member states, and post-secondary education institutions worldwide to:

5. **Decolonize knowledge systems.** This involves deconstructing colonial knowledge systems and structures and reconstructing Indigenous ones so that the commitment and alignment of national and international rights of Indigenous peoples can be actualized in higher education and training systems.
6. **Decolonize mainstream higher education itself.** An important part of this process involves offering programming in Indigenous languages. This teaching should begin with primary schools. As part of the decolonization process, governments and institutions should do more to address racism, recognize the sophistication of Indigenous ways of knowing, and integrate Indigenous ways of knowing, doing, and being into post-secondary education systems. Post-secondary education institutions should increase support for Indigenous students and promote their well-being.

We call upon Indigenous peoples, their representative organizations, and their higher education institutions worldwide to:

7. **Continue to pursue both decolonization and indigenization.** Although these Indigenous higher education institutions are at the core of cultural repatriation, many were set up in the shadow or framework of the mainstream higher education system.

States and mainstream post-secondary institutions should support the efforts to further decolonize and indigenize these institutions.

New roles and recognition

We call upon United Nations member states to:

8. **Fund Indigenous higher education institutions adequately, on par with mainstream institutions.** Such funding will support the development and implementation of courses, programs and research based on Indigenous ways of knowing and doing.
9. **Stop requiring Indigenous universities to duplicate, mimic or compete with mainstream ones.** Indigenous universities should have the space and resources to focus on empowering the communities they serve. There should be no barriers to entry and less emphasis on graduate programs, which existing mainstream institutions are already well-equipped to offer.
10. **Ensure that non-Indigenous institutions support their Indigenous counterparts.** Mainstream institutions must work with or alongside Indigenous post-secondary institutions to ensure the latter are recognized and to further enhance their role, visibility, influence, and responsibility for the education of Indigenous people.
11. **Accredit and fund Indigenous higher education institutions.** They should have access to their own recognized programming, degrees and diplomas. This entails validating programs, recognizing the importance and value of Indigenous knowledge systems, and providing sufficient funding.

We call upon post-secondary education institutions worldwide to:

12. **Include and reflect Indigenous knowledge and lifeways in their governance and operations.** Indigenous communities are critical to building education that will meet the needs of Indigenous learners and communities. They are also critical to developing standards and benchmarks for post-secondary programs.
13. **Recognize Indigenous science for its role in protecting and respecting the land and ensuring that life on Earth remains sustainable over time.** For this to happen, post-secondary education institutions need to recognize further that Indigenous ways of knowing are learned not in classrooms, but on the land, and we need to find a way to bring this awareness and practice to higher education. Higher education systems have to recognize cultural property rights in the same way as intellectual property rights to protect Indigenous knowledges. These actions are in line with the implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

Faculty supports and leadership

We call upon United Nations member states and post-secondary education institutions worldwide to:

14. **Intentionally nurture and develop more Indigenous researchers who can design and lead research for and by Indigenous communities.** This will help demonstrate the world-class nature of Indigenous research and the importance of Indigenous knowledge.
15. **Work to attract more Indigenous people to the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields.** More funding and support are needed to attract and retain students in STEM fields, and teaching in those areas should be respectful and inclusive of Indigenous knowledge. These actions are needed to help foster the leadership who will lead innovations in sustainable development.

We call post-secondary education institutions worldwide to:

16. **Put mechanisms in place that recognize the unique responsibilities that Indigenous faculty members have to their communities.** These post-secondary education institutions must assist Indigenous faculty in supporting their communities. This would enable institutions to better attract and retain Indigenous faculty members. For example, recognition of fulfilment of community responsibilities in tenure assessments helps support the career advancement of Indigenous faculty and benefits their communities.

More generous and creative student supports

We call upon United Nations member states and post-secondary education institutions worldwide to:

17. **Improve supports for Indigenous students.** This entails recognizing the unique needs of Indigenous students, who are also often valued and essential community members. Institutions need to make it easier for these students to remain active in their communities while pursuing their education so that students are not forced to choose between the two.

Indigenous institutions should be welcoming places of language and cultural revitalization, community engagement, inclusiveness and accessibility. For this to happen, Indigenous institutions must be able to go beyond simply requesting “space in the academy” and have the capacity to *define their own space*.

18. **Encourage more Indigenous students to attend post-secondary education and training.** Indigenous students (and faculty) need to see others who look and think like them in post-secondary institutions.