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Paths to Reconciliation: An Overview of the Current Educational Landscape

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Cover Design
Beauty in Bloom by Emily Kewageshig



About Indspire

Indspire is an Indigenous national registered charity that invests in the education of Indigenous people for the long-term benefit of these individuals, their families and communities, and Canada. With the support of its funding partners, Indspire disburses financial awards, delivers programs, and shares resources with the goal of improving educational outcomes for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis students. Through Indspire's education offerings, we provide resources to students, educators, communities, and other stakeholders who are committed to improving success for Indigenous youth. In 2021-2022, Indspire awarded over \$23 million through 6,612 bursaries and scholarships to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis youth, making it the largest funder of Indigenous post-secondary education outside the federal government.

About Research Knowledge Nest

The Indspire *Research Knowledge Nest* is the first Indigenous research program of its kind in Canada. With data analysis skills rapidly becoming critical to economic success, the *Research Knowledge Nest* is poised to seize this exciting opportunity to foster Indigenous engagement and leadership in quantitative research and data science roles. The program will be guided by an Advisory Committee of researchers, leaders, and key stakeholders who will provide direction and input on the development of this important initiative.

Cover Design – *Beauty in Bloom by Emily Kewageshig*

Emily Kewageshig is an Anishnaabe artist and visual storyteller from Saugeen First Nation No. 29. Her work captures the interconnection of life forms using both traditional and contemporary materials. Her work is centered around themes of birth, death, and rebirth as they are closely intertwined in both her cultural teachings and personal lived experiences. Emily celebrated her first solo exhibition titled "Mooshknemgog Bmaadziwin: Full Circle" (2020), which was shown at the Tom Thomson Art Gallery in Owen Sound, Ontario. She continues to create artwork for various organizations to highlight Indigenous knowledge and culture. She graduated from Sheridan College's Visual and Creative Arts Diploma program with Honours in 2017, receiving the "Best in Show" award at the final graduate exhibition. She attended OCAD University in the BFA Indigenous Visual Culture program (2017-2020).

Founding Supporters

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Background

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was formed in 2008, resulting from a legal settlement between residential school survivors, the Assembly of First Nations, Inuit representatives, and those responsible for the schools, including the federal government and churches (NCTR, 2015). The TRC's mandate was to document and share the stories and experiences of those affected by residential schools, bringing Canada's assimilative practices to light (NCTR, 2015). To counter those ongoing harms caused by the legacy of residential schools, the TRC published its final report, including 94 recommendations, or "Calls to Action," in December of 2015 (Jewell & Mosby, 2021). The Calls to Action advise all Canadians and major institutions to take considerable action towards reconciliation, covering topics such as business, education, health, youth, women, justice, and more. While each Call to Action is designed to dismantle ongoing colonial systems (Jewell & Mosby, 2021), this report will review those Calls to Action that directly address the needs of Indigenous post-secondary students. Outlined in the TRC's Calls to Action are:

- 11.** We call upon the federal government to provide adequate funding to end the backlog of First Nations students seeking a post-secondary education.
- 16.** We call upon post-secondary institutions to create university and college degree and diploma programs in Aboriginal languages.
- 62. ii** Provide the necessary funding to post-secondary institutions to educate teachers on how to integrate Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods into classrooms. (NCTR, 2015).

While these particular Calls to Action directly address the need to Indigenize the post-secondary environment, all 94 recommendations should be considered when working towards a long-lasting strategic plan. It's important to note that much of the work begins with increased funding efforts from the federal government. Highlighted within the recommendations listed above is the need for overall educational attainment of Indigenous students, to reclaim Indigenous languages in an academic setting, and to strengthen the presence of Indigenous knowledges in mainstream curricula.

Purpose

It has been over six years since the TRC released its final report and 94 Calls to Action. According to the Yellowhead Institute's 2021 Report on Calls to Action, there is "little to no movement on the more substantive, structural changes called for by the TRC." Many Indigenous students continue to experience significant educational and career gaps compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts (Treleaven, 2018). These gaps can be attributed to the lack of core changes made within the post-secondary landscape. On the other hand, there is a noticeable tendency to check off symbolic elements outlined in the Calls to Action, often thought to be quick remedies to larger systemic problems (Jewell & Mosby 2021).

Reconciliation, and the Calls to Action, are not a simplified checklist to rectify those ongoing harms that Indigenous peoples endure. Instead, the Calls to Action is a guide to sustaining relationships with Indigenous peoples and must be revisited on a continual basis (Jewell & Mosby, 2021). Post-secondary institutions (PSIs) have played a significant role in the ongoing colonialism that has impacted Indigenous peoples and communities, placing a greater responsibility on them to now improve their relations with Indigenous peoples and close longstanding education and career gaps.

It's important to consider how major universities and colleges take those next steps towards reconciliation, ultimately improving the educational experience for Indigenous peoples. For this research project, qualitative data was collected on PSIs that have created and released an Indigenous strategy, reconciliation strategy, or a specific component of their school's overall strategic plan. There will be a focus on how research universities, non-research universities, colleges, and French-speaking institutions across Canada have uniquely responded to the Calls to Action, given their geographic region and engagement efforts. The schools' responses are typically found in PDF format on their institutional websites.

At the heart of this project is the concept of accountability. A combination of increased visibility and accountability to both internal and external stakeholders should hopefully ensure that PSIs remain committed to the Reconciliation Plans they have constructed. This literature review explores common ideas and themes that emerge from Canadian PSIs' response to the TRC Calls to Action. There is interest from a wide variety of partners and entities in how PSIs across Canada have integrated the TRC Calls to Action, particularly those Calls related to the educational experience of Indigenous peoples.

Approach

The analysis started with a preliminary list of Canadian PSIs, compiled and organized thematically. As seen in Table 1, a data dictionary was created to assist in the study of PSIs. The data dictionary included various categories associated with reconciliation or indigenization efforts by a school. The categories included schools with: an Indigenization or Reconciliation Plans, Indigenization Efforts, Anticipated Future Plans, Indigenous Institutions, or No Plan. The data dictionary also highlights the presence of Indigenous institutions in a Western-dominated educational environment, which may be explored further in future projects. This step was integral in distinguishing schools' reconciliation efforts from each other, focusing on those who took action toward a workable plan.

Each category was then accompanied by a clear definition and example (not pictured), making the categorization process more concise. Next, the list of institutions was revisited and colour-coded based on each institution's website and plan content. Five separate categories of schools were created, with each one shaded in the appropriate colour which aligned with their reconciliation efforts.¹ Institutions with multiple campus locations were aggregated as one, while satellite institutions were considered individually.

Table 1: Data Dictionary that distinguishes PSI's on their levels of reconciliation efforts

Category	Definition
Indigenization or Reconciliation Plans	An institution that has a set for formal policies, practices, and plans that are based off of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.
Indigenous Initiatives	An institution that has facilitated events, grants, scholarships, opportunities, or advisory councils that align with TRC recommendations, but no formal plan or policy is in place. This may also include plans that include other minority groups, but not explicitly Indigenous groups.
Anticipated Future Plans	An institution who may have hired on a Plan Lead but has not formally committed to an Indigenization or reconciliation plan.
Indigenous Institution	An institution that is Indigenous-owned or operated.
No Plan	An institution that has not committed to a plan or Indigenous Strategy of any kind. May also include affiliate universities with no formal plan of their own.

¹ For this project, institutions recognized as "Indigenous schools" were omitted from the data analysis, as the notion of accountability is placed on non-Indigenous institutions

Early Findings

Of the 109 schools considered in this project, 51 responded to the TRC Calls to Action with an Indigenization or Reconciliation Plan. Additionally, 46 schools have Indigenization Efforts with no concrete plan or strategy. Eight institutions announced an Anticipated Future Plan, which often comes from anticipating the hires of plan leads or working on strategic planning sessions. Of all schools, only five have made no visible efforts towards reconciliation.

Further analysis revealed that reconciliation efforts vary by geographic region. With more than six years from the initial release of the Calls to Action, it is hoped to see more long-term efforts are made, reflective of Indigenous peoples' needs in the education sphere.

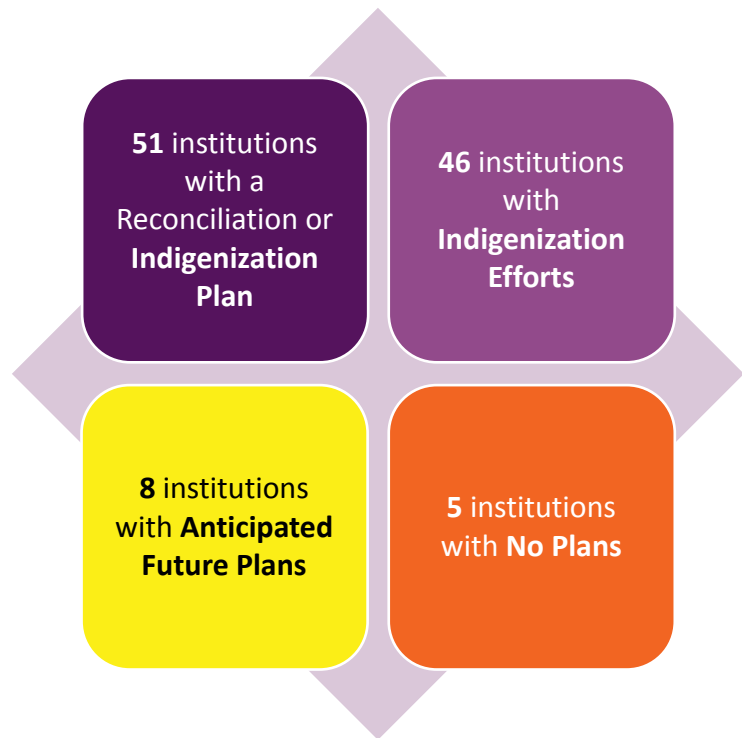


Figure 1: Early statistics on levels of reconciliation efforts retrieved from the colour-coding process

Figure 2 reflects the proportions of TRC efforts by province or region. The data shows that schools within Manitoba, the North², Ontario, and British Columbia have higher reconciliation or Indigenization plans ratios with their institutions. The Maritimes³ region has the highest proportion of Indigenization efforts in PSIs but fewer schools with plans. Interestingly, the highest proportion of schools having no reconciliation plans comes from the province of Quebec, with 25% of all schools having no visible strategies through their institutions' websites.

Figure 3 displays additional information on Indspire's current Building Brighter Futures (BBF) post-secondary partners by their province or region, compared to those with a Reconciliation or Indigenization Plan. Ontario has the highest number of BBF partners; however, only 56% of these institutions have a Reconciliation or Indigenization Plan. By contrast, all other provinces and regions have substantially lower amounts of schools partnered with Indspire, showing more significant opportunities to expand regionally. Overall, there appears to be a correlation between the number of BBF partners and a sustainable reconciliation plan – or a lack thereof.

² Northern region includes Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut.

³ Maritimes region includes New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island

Indigenization and/or Reconciliation Efforts by Canadian Post-Secondary Institution by Province/Region

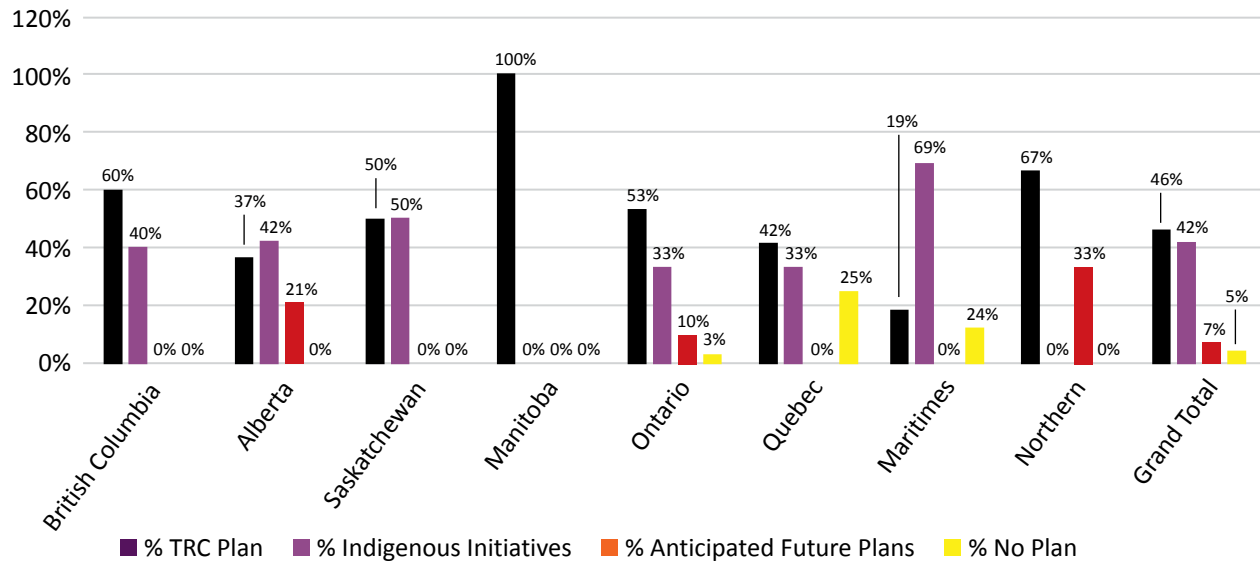


Figure 2: Displays the percentage of all public PSI's, broken down by province/region.

BBF Post-secondary Partners with Indigenization and/or Reconciliation Plans by Province/Region

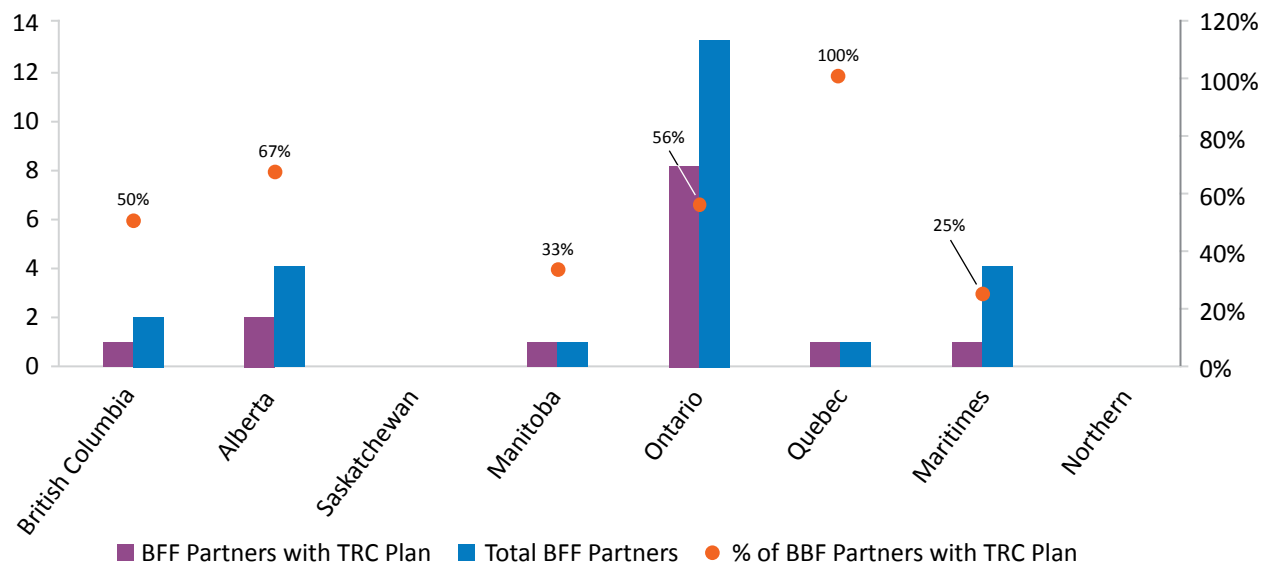


Figure 3: Displays the percentage of BBF post-secondary partners with an Indigenization or Reconciliation plan, broken down by province and region.

Schools with an Indigenization or Reconciliation Plan were prioritized and sampled using a qualitative analysis software known as NVivo. The first sample included 12 schools. The sample selection ensured diversity related to geographic location and school type (research, non-research, college, francophone). Individual plans were read, scanned, and coded for relevant subthemes related to reconciliation efforts. After the coding process was complete, the surfaced codes were brought back to the Research and Impact Unit for discussion and analysis. From this group analysis, four major themes were identified:

- History, Culture, and Knowledge
- Implementing Research and Policy
- Fostering Trust
- Creating an Inclusive Environment

An interim report and relevant data tables were presented for feedback. The method was repeated for an additional 10 schools to ensure that the data sample encompassed a diverse set of PSIs. One more major theme emerged from this coding process:

Culturally Relevant Supports. The goal was to refine these previously identified themes and subthemes while creating room for any other pertinent ideas that emerged from the coding process.

The five identified key themes encompass many different reports from 22 different PSIs' Reconciliation Plans. While this number does not account for all the schools with plans or Indigenization efforts, it is considered a strong foundation for more PSIs to explore the ideas of reconciliation and widen the scope to include for future research.

Themes Discussion

Overall, the five overarching themes include the short, medium, and long-term⁴ initiatives that schools and their engagement partners have planned. Each of the themes will discuss the various subthemes identified in the collective response by PSIs exploring their respective relevance to reconciliation. An important reminder is that many of these plans are carried out by PSIs, with their partners and local communities' best interests. The surfaced ideas, brought forth by Indspire's Research and Impact Unit, are thought to be a synopsis of those unique ideas. Highlighting the collective response to the TRC Calls to Action provides a space for conversation to further these actions, inspire institutions that have not taken those steps, and create further discussion on improving existing practices in the educational landscape.

⁴ Short-term goals generally take less than one year to achieve, medium-term goals may take one to three years to achieve, and long-term goals may take longer than three years.

History, Culture, and Knowledge

Throughout various strategies and reports, it is common to acknowledge the historical relations between Canada and Indigenous peoples – specifically, the legacy of residential schools. This acknowledgment typically sets the tone for the rest of the strategic plan. Ideally, history and land acknowledgments will influence the institution to raise cultural awareness across campus – whether through mandatory Indigenous studies courses, cultural sensitivity training for staff, or other efforts put forth by the institution. Institutions establish a general understanding of Indigenous groups and uphold traditional Indigenous knowledge. Unique to each territory, schools incorporate local Indigenous languages within strategic planning sessions or campus spaces. For example, Queen’s University’s “Yakwanastahentéha Aankenjigemi Extending the Rafters: Truth and Reconciliation Commission Task Force Final Report” prioritizes local Indigenous languages by implementing phrases throughout their report, as well as publishing versions translated into Kanien’keha (Mohawk) and Anishinaabemowin (Ojibway) (Queen’s University, 2017). Schools foster a deeper understanding of traditional cultures, inviting Elders and other knowledge holders to guide existing curricula, provide on-campus support, and implement Indigenous languages across the physical spaces. Indigenous knowledge is being fused into the Western educational landscape, emphasizing curricula and specialized programs.

Implementing Research and Policy

Research practices, especially within more prominent universities, are reviewed to improve engagement with Indigenous peoples and communities. These practices are commonly aligned with the TRC’s Calls to Action. There are also specific mentions of the United Nation’s Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the First Nation’s Principles of Ownership, Control, Accessibility and Possession (OCAP). It is essential to respectfully engage and include Indigenous peoples in all stages of the research project. Indigenous peoples are increasingly leading various research projects within the institution. Revisiting post-secondary schools’ policies on a regular basis enhances the safety and well-being of Indigenous students. In this way, many elements of Indigenous student life, particularly involving cultural expression, are protected from harassment and discrimination. Larger schools also use their capability to advocate and strengthen existing policies, challenging existing federal and provincial policies on Indigenous peoples. In the University of British Columbia’s (UBC) Indigenous Strategic Plan, the university plans to complete an “institution-wide study, and publish a public report of the findings, that identifies UBC’s participation in the implementation of Crown colonial policies” (UBC, 2020). Given their capacity, larger and more visible universities will hopefully begin making these efforts to shape the educational landscape in a pattern for other schools to follow.

Fostering Trust

Building trust between PSIs and Indigenous peoples is a shared approach toward reconciliation. Common subthemes include the initial accountability element from institutions, which typically acknowledges the institution's participation in colonial policies and procedures. This also leads to greater responsibility for PSIs to dismantle those colonial barriers that have prevented Indigenous peoples from pursuing higher education. There are substantial efforts to practice meaningful engagement processes with Indigenous peoples on local and global scales. Common approaches include collaborative planning activities and partnerships with Indigenous communities and organizations. The Memorial University of Newfoundland created its Strategic Framework for Indigenization through 26 engagement sessions with Indigenous communities across Newfoundland and Labrador. As outlined in their collective plan, additional engagement sessions are needed to develop guidelines on land acknowledgments and protocols across campus (Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2021). As a result, PSIs seek to effectively interact with Indigenous groups, creating impactful changes that align with community-based needs.

Creating an Inclusive Environment

There are direct efforts to create an inclusive environment for Indigenous peoples in academia, commonly stated in schools' Indigenization or Reconciliation Plans. These efforts include increasing overall Indigenous representation on campus, including students, staff and faculty, and board members. This consists of revising admissions criteria, staff recruitment processes, or creating space for Indigenous peoples in decision-making positions. The widespread need to increase the Indigenous student presence comes from a growing need to centre Indigenous academics across PSIs. This also means changing the way mainstream society perceives Indigenous identities and shifting away from the pan-Indigeneity that comes from a Western-dominant perspective and choosing to acknowledge diverse Indigenous backgrounds. Schools also aim to remove barriers to education through financial aid, housing opportunities, or flexible learning options all specifically designed for Indigenous students. Anti-discrimination or human rights policies are also revisited to ensure a safe, inclusive space. The University of Saskatchewan states its commitment to a "safer space" for Indigenous peoples in their Indigenous Strategy. The university says it is committed to creating access to support services and safe spaces for Indigenous students, faculty, and leaders facing racism and discrimination (University of Saskatchewan, 2020). Further, the school hopes to embrace *manācihitowin*⁵ by creating respectful practices and encouraging ethical relationality. (University of Saskatchewan, 2020).

Culturally Relevant Supports

Finally, another important theme explores the different cultural supports an institution offers. Some forms of support include programming focused on wholistic well-being, Indigenous knowledge, traditional teachings, and languages. A specific example provides peer networking opportunities to connect with other Indigenous peoples and form kinships. Other forms of cultural support include the provision of in-residence Elders. This can be implemented through individual or group sessions. Mentorship is another key aspect of culturally relevant support, especially instances that foster reciprocal relationships between mentor and mentee. These supports go hand-in-hand with the advancement of Indigenous students beyond their post-secondary experience. Other examples include post-secondary transition supports, career preparations, and networking opportunities. Lethbridge College's Niitsitapi Strategy upholds student well-being, with plans to deliver term-to-term holistic services to ensure student success. The college also plans to offer an Indigenous Career Pathways (ICP) program, providing Indigenous students with "seamless collaboration" between faculty, student services, and cultural supports in their transition to post-secondary (Lethbridge College, 2016).

⁵ A Cree phrase for "let us respect each other."

Conclusion

We hope to continue our data analysis to identify other key themes and ideas from PSIs' strategies. An important reminder is that many plans and strategies may emerge from PSIs as engagement processes prove to be extensive. As PSIs are increasingly called upon to act on reconciliation, the themes identified may change accordingly. While many institutions are influenced by the TRC's Calls to Action, each has responded uniquely according to their respective capacity, territory, and local Indigenous community. It is critical for PSIs to review their stated efforts on these Calls to Actions on a regular basis. Efforts made by PSIs will never reach completion, as it is an ongoing commitment to improving relationships with Indigenous peoples. There are many positive shifts in Western education at the post-secondary level, but the work should continue at a more efficient rate, while ensuring longevity for future generations of Indigenous students.

Next Steps

One aspect of this project highlighted Indigenous institutions and their presence in a Western-dominated educational environment. This report focuses on major PSIs and how they have aligned their strategies to the TRC's 94 Calls to Action. In the future, it is recommended that the list of Indigenous institutions is used to continue the conversations on community-based efforts to enhance and sustain Indigenous knowledge. It would also be helpful to use this list as a resource for potential partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous institutions. Another recommendation is to continue placing accountability measures on schools with reconciliation or Indigenization plans. With Indspire acting as a mediator between Indigenous student achievement and PSIs, we may be uniquely positioned to cultivate this work further. Equally important is the need to continue conversations with institutions that do not have a concrete plan. It is crucial to remember that Indigenous peoples' well-being is at the forefront of these conversations, and all interactions should be meaningful and respectful. Finally, the burden of responsibility should not be placed on local communities alone - it should be a shared effort towards accountability where measures are put in place to ensure a commitment to reconciliation.

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