



Reconciliation Requires Housing:

Exploring Student Housing Options at Canadian Universities in Relation to the Needs of Indigenous Learners

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CONFERENCE “MEET & GREET”

Research TOPIC:

Indigenous Geography – Housing and Homelessness

Research QUESTION:

Are there appropriate and adequate student housing options for Indigenous learners at Canadian universities?

Research THESIS:

Student housing currently offered at Canadian universities are not viable options for the vast majority of Indigenous learners.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last 5 years, universities across Canada have launched a number of initiatives with the primary objectives of increasing enrolment and success of Indigenous learners. These initiatives have come in large part as a response to the release of the Calls to Action by the Truth & Reconciliation Commission in 2015, recognizing that, “Universities have a major role to play in addressing Canada’s Indigenous education gap and supporting the reconciliation process.”⁷

Nationally, universities have largely focused on enhancing on-campus supports and resources. Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners at Canadian universities now enjoy increased opportunities to engage with Indigenous knowledges and cultures through the more frequent offerings of Indigenous studies courses as well as the increased hiring of Indigenous faculty and staff.

Although this increase of resources offer enhanced support to Indigenous learners once they get to campus, there remains a number of substantial barriers to accessing post-secondary education for Indigenous peoples. Most notably, the housing needs of Indigenous learners has yet to be re-examined post-Truth & Reconciliation. As early as 2004, several research studies have identified the distinct housing needs of Indigenous learners engaged in post-secondary studies. Additionally, national studies have identified a significant proportion of Indigenous families have core housing needs and disproportionately experience homelessness in Canada.

As universities across the nation seek to support reconciliation through a variety of initiatives, the development of housing specifically for Indigenous learners must be prioritized.

This research aims to (i) enhance understanding of the distinct housing needs of Indigenous learners and (ii) facilitate the collaboration of relevant stakeholders to develop Indigenous learner specific housing.

METHODS

Environmental Scan

The primary method of data collection was a review of current literature examining the housing experiences of Indigenous learners pursuing post-secondary studies. Articles were selected if the research focused on Indigenous learners (First Nations, Métis and/or Inuit) and their housing experiences (on campus or off) while attending a post-secondary institution located in the colony of Canada.

Content Analysis

A review of university websites and published strategies (both university-wide and Indigenous-specific) was also conducted. This process primarily sought to ascertain the relevance of student housing to university-wide and Indigenous-specific planning. Additionally, by identifying the articulation of key aspects of the Indigenous strategic plan within the overall university plan, this process aimed to establish the connections and prominence of Indigenous priorities within the overall institution’s priorities.

Secondary Data

The inclusion of current housing costs as well as available income data has been included to contextualize the critical role student housing plays in supporting Indigenous learners.

FINDINGS

Student housing is of critical importance to the recruitment, retention and degree completion of Indigenous learners. Yet, regional research conducted in British Columbia, Saskatchewan and Alberta indicates student housing options at Canadian universities are structurally and culturally inadequate to meet the needs of Indigenous learners.

RECRUITMENT, RETENTION & COMPLETION

Existing literature has established housing as a key concern for Indigenous post-secondary learners.^{1,2,4} Typically tied to finances, Indigenous learners consistently ranked housing as critical in deciding where to study as well as decisions to complete their studies.¹

DEMOGRAPHICS OF INDIGENOUS LEARNERS

Regional research investigating the housing experiences of Indigenous learners pursuing university studies in British Columbia and Saskatchewan have shown a significant proportion of learners are mature in age, typically between 22 and 40 years of age.^{1,2} Notably, among Indigenous learners participating in these studies, approximately 50% had 1 or more dependents^{1,2}. Indicating distinct housing needs.

INDIGENOUS STUDENT HOUSING EXPERIENCE

Indigenous learners are resilient. Despite facing numerous challenges in accessing affordable and adequate housing⁴, Indigenous learners persevere. While the majority tend to live off-campus, early research reveals many Indigenous learners are experiencing forms of homelessness such as living in shelters, couch-surfing and relying on other forms of informal housing to continue their studies.²

Racial and income discrimination are common experiences amongst Indigenous learners seeking market housing.^{1,2,5} Indigenous students who experienced racial discrimination were more likely to self-report their university experience somewhat to very stressful.⁵

INCOME GAP

As shown in the chart below, and articulated in of the articles examining housing experiences, many Indigenous learners face a significant income gap between their monthly income and the market costs of adequate housing.

HOUSING AFFORDABILITY IN CANADA

	LONDON \$1,118 Average 2-bedroom apartment cost ⁸ \$40,248 Income needed to be <i>affordable</i> ⁹ \$28,554 Average Aboriginal income ¹⁰
	TORONTO \$2,407 Average 2-bedroom apartment cost ⁸ \$86,652 Income needed to be <i>affordable</i> ⁹ \$35,397 Average Aboriginal income ¹⁰
	EDMONTON \$1,257 Average 2-bedroom apartment cost ⁸ \$45,252 Income needed to be <i>affordable</i> ⁹ \$38,810 Average Aboriginal income ¹⁰
	VANCOUVER \$2,068 Average 2-bedroom apartment cost ⁸ \$74,448 Income needed to be <i>affordable</i> ⁹ \$32,273 Average Aboriginal income ¹⁰

WHAT’S NEXT

A nationally coordinated, regionally implemented comprehensive study is needed to enhance understanding of how access to affordable and adequate housing impacts Indigenous learners.

Next steps in research to be considered, include activities such as:

- Research consultation and ideation with First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities and organizations
- Regional study of the housing experiences of Indigenous learners currently enrolled at a university in Ontario
- Longitudinal studies of the retention and completion of Indigenous learners living on and off-campus.
- National survey of housing needs of Indigenous learners currently attending college or university
- In-depth assessment of existing Indigenous-specific student housing

CONCLUSIONS

Addressing the housing needs of Indigenous learners requires reconciliation not inclusion.

The dominant university student housing model of shared accommodations for singles is structurally and culturally insufficient to meet the needs of Indigenous learners. Current institutional policy attempts to include Indigenous learners in existing student housing fails to recognize and address the distinct demographics of Indigenous learners.

Indigenous learners require and deserve housing built specifically to meet their needs.

There is a significant knowledge gap across Canada in understanding the current housing experiences of Indigenous post-secondary learners. Dedicated student housing research focused on the experiences of Indigenous learners is required to identify and address housing impacts on the ability of Indigenous learners to pursue, succeed and complete post-secondary studies.

REFERENCES

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8. Private Average Apartment Rents for each Census Metropolitan Area data was collected from the Canada Mortgage and Housing (2019)
9. Income needed to be affordable is calculated based on the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation’s general guidelines that housing costs should not exceed 30% of household income.
10. Average Aboriginal Income (after taxes) collected from 2016 Census, Stats Canada