

STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON INDIGENIZING A UNIVERSITY IN CANADA

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Abstract

This article explores student perspectives on indigenizing and decolonizing at a Canadian mid-size university. The authors conducted focus groups with Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and found three main themes regarding indigenization: the need for institutional responsibility and action, enhancing Indigenous visibility and influence on campus, and challenging colonial structures. The insights from the students were in line with previous literature that suggests the university has a responsibility to take on the work of indigenization and must make the work an institutional priority. The findings indicate a need for more transparency from the institution to let students know about indigenization work and demonstrate the value for student perspectives on the subject.

Keywords: indigenizing, decolonizing, reconciliation, higher education, student perspectives

Résumé

Cet article explore les perspectives étudiantes sur l'autochtonisation et la décolonisation au sein d'une université canadienne de taille moyenne. Les auteures ont mené des groupes de discussion réunissant des étudiantes autochtones et non autochtones, et ont dégagé trois principaux thèmes relatifs à l'autochtonisation : la nécessité pour l'établissement d'enseignement d'assumer ses responsabilités et de passer à l'action, le renforcement de la visibilité et de l'influence des peuples autochtones sur le campus, ainsi que la

remise en question des structures coloniales. Les points de vue exprimés par les étudiantes concordent avec la littérature existante, selon laquelle l'université doit assumer la responsabilité du travail d'autochtonisation et en faire une priorité organisationnelle. Les résultats soulignent également la nécessité d'une plus grande transparence de la part de l'établissement afin d'informer les étudiant[e]s des initiatives d'autochtonisation en cours et de valoriser les perspectives étudiantes sur ces enjeux.

Mots-clés : autochtonisation, décolonisation, réconciliation, enseignement supérieur, perspectives étudiantes

INTRODUCTION

This article explores student perspectives on indigenizing and decolonizing work within a mid-size university in southern Ontario, the University of Guelph. The concept of “decolonizing the academy” has been around for decades (Mihesuah & Wilson, 2004) but following the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015), there has been an increase on the part of Canadian universities to take up what is often referred to as “indigenizing” the academy (Cote-Meek & Moeke-Pickering, 2020). Literature offering student perspectives and, in particular, student-authored work on reconciliation, indigenizing, and decolonizing activity within universities is limited. Our team, consisting of Indigenous and non-Indigenous student authors and a faculty supervisor, conducted three focus groups involving Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in the winter semester of 2020 to explore their perspectives on indigenizing and decolonization in our institution. This research was conducted at a time when discussions of our campus’s Indigenous Initiatives Strategy were in early stages; we offer some concluding reflections on the findings based on progress within our institution as we know it now.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In 2018, Gaudry and Lorenz published a paper in which they set out to explore how Indigenous people and settler allies were envisioning “indigenizing the academy” in the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) calls to action. Drawing from a survey of 25 mostly Indigenous scholars and allies, they identified indigenization in Canadian post-secondary institutions along a three-part continuum: Indigenous inclusion, reconciliation indigenization, and decolonial indigenization. Some of the examples they included along the continuum are as follows:

- **Indigenous inclusion:** adding Indigenous faculty and students into existing structures, offering supports for Indigenous peoples to adjust/succeed within these structures.
- **Reconciliation indigenization:** incorporating Indigenous epistemologies into curriculum, establishing Indigenous advisory or reconciliation committees, ensuring the university takes responsibility for citizen education regarding Indigenous Peoples and reconciliation, following Indigenous leadership.
- **Decolonial indigenization:** treaty or “dual university” models, resurgence approaches involving land-based learning, community-led research and teaching, re-learning of languages, ceremonies and other aspects of Indigenous cultures.

We found this work useful as a theoretical framework to explore student perceptions of indigenization, as it offered a sense of the limitations and possibilities. We wanted to explore how indigenization work is envisioned, but from the lens of students. We chose to ask the participants in our study about “decolonizing” the academy because we wanted to open their responses to the most far-reaching possibilities. The examples identified on Gaudry and Lorenz’s (2018) continuum offered us a place to return to in our conclusions about progress within our institution.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While we asked students about “decolonizing” our university, our research was informed by a literature search on “decolonizing,” “indigenizing,” and “reconciliation” in the context of post-secondary education. We start here with quotation marks around the terms to signal the broad and inconsistent ways these terms are used (Brunette-Debassige et al., 2022; Fiola & Mackinnon, 2020). Decolonization and indigenization are often discussed as reconciliation measures in post-secondary institutions; the terms sometimes appear interchangeably, sometimes in tandem, or, as in the case of Gaudry and Lorenz (2018), combined. The expansive, “loose” (Brunette-Debassige et al., 2022), or even “trendy” (Drouin-Gagné, 2021) way “decolonization” and “indigenization” have been taken up speaks to how institutions and scholars are grappling with the limits and possibilities of the work.

While we were interested in how students might define and discuss “decolonization” at our institution, we recognize that, for some, decolonization is an overly ambitious, if not impossible, goal, given the history and positioning of post-secondary institutions in settler-states like Canada (Lavalee, 2020, p. 120). Some assert that institutions do not seem ready for the “sacrificing privilege, power and control” (George, 2019, p. 75) or being “materially grounded in/as concrete responses to settler colonial dispossession, i.e., in Indigenous land-back” (Chatterjee et al., 2022, p. 4). For some, decolonization involves nothing less than a return of land (Grafton & Melançon, 2020). Some see decoloniza-

tion as a necessary first step prior to introducing indigenizing initiatives (George, 2019); others call for a concurrent process, involving the “rigorous analysis and dismantling of Eurocentric and colonial ideologies embedded in disciplinary structures and canons as well as university governance, policy and practice” (Brunette-Debassige, 2022, p. 5). Within these definitions, decolonization remains largely aspirational, but there are glimpses of decolonial indigenization in the literature amidst the more prevalent inclusion and reconciliation approaches.

As a starting point, we note that indigenization work all along the Gaudry and Lorenz (2018) continuum requires accountability and responsibility on the part of post-secondary institutions, which, as articulated by faculty, staff, and students at Western University, involves “critical self-reflexivity regarding the settler colonial elements of [the institution’s] history, mission, curriculum, and institutional norms” (Steinman & Kovats Sánchez, 2023, p. 320). Frameworks and models for indigenization speak to the need for action-oriented settler accountability, along with respect for Indigenous knowledges, and attention to relationships (Legault & Bleau, 2025; Mitchell et al., 2018; Pidgeon, 2016). Scholars have stressed that indigenization requires meaningful engagement with community (Academia Group, 2016; Pidgeon, 2016) and Indigenous leadership at all levels (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Mitchell et al., 2018). A review of 97 post-secondary institutions in Canada found that 47 now have senior Indigenous leadership positions (Newhouse & Abbott, 2024) and many institutions have implemented Indigenous faculty hiring strategies. Indigenous leadership in the academy has undoubtedly advanced the work of Indigenous strategies, but administrators report being under-resourced and overworked (Brunette-Debassige, 2023; Povey et al., 2022) and Indigenous faculty are experiencing an overload of indigenization work to the point of “reconciliation fatigue” (Council of Ontario Universities, 2020; Stein, 2020).

Calls for the incorporation of Indigenous epistemologies into post-secondary education have been in circulation for some time (Battiste 2013, 2016; Kuokannen, 2008; Pidgeon, 2014;

Smith & Smith, 2018), and recent anthologies have addressed the decolonial possibilities in bringing Indigenous language, storytelling, arts-based methods, community engagement, relational pedagogies, and land-based learning into the curriculum (Cote-Meek & Moeke Pickering, 2020; Datta, 2023; King et al., 2024; Kress & Horn-Miller, 2023; Poitras-Pratt & Bodnaresko, 2023; Styres & Kempf, 2022). In their review of indigenizing curriculum initiatives across Canada, Brunette-Debassige et al. (2022) identified five emerging approaches: (1) including Indigenous knowledges and perspectives across the disciplines, (2) capacity building through curriculum support and informal learning/unlearning opportunities, (3) mandatory Indigenous course requirements, (4) increasing Indigenous autonomy by elevating and creating Indigenous programs and offices, and (5) creating partnerships with Indigenous organizations (p. 2). While recognizing the value of these initiatives, Brunette-Debassige et al. (2022) conclude that they “are largely minor reforms as they focus on changing individuals through consciousness-raising rather than radically challenging and altering Euro-Western institutional structures and system” (p. 11).

The limitations of transforming curriculum have been challenged by scholars who argue that the incorporation of Indigenous knowledges can be reduced to bringing an Indigenous “perspective” to institutional environments “whose epistemic centres are implicitly construed as rooted in Western knowledges” (Chatterjee et al., 2022, p. 11). Some scholars question ongoing practices of “studying about” Indigenous people rather than challenging colonial disciplinary spaces within the institution (Steinman & Kovats Sánchez, 2023, p. 310). Stein (2020) draws attention to the limitations of decolonizing within institutional productivity requirements and the pressures of academic promotion.

Research on Indigenous post-secondary student experiences has identified struggles with racism (Bailey, 2016; Efimoff & Starzyk, 2025; Park & Bahia, 2022), lateral violence (Bailey, 2016), microaggressions (Canel-Çınarbaş & Yohani, 2019; Clark et al., 2014), and the need

for supports (Alejandro et al., 2020; Kristoff & Cottrell, 2021; Walton et al., 2020). These studies indicate that students at all levels of post-secondary are challenged with even the most basic forms of inclusion. American graduate students in a study by Venable et al. (2016) called for more Indigenous literature, Indigenous faculty hiring, coursework that addresses Indigenous methodologies, material supports for graduate students, and the education of non-Indigenous students on “Indigenous histories, theories, knowledge, cultures, and futures” (p. 359).

Efimoff (2019, 2022) stands out for conducting research that was inspired by their work as an Indigenous student leader at the University of Saskatchewan. Their interviews with other student leaders demonstrated that students are often heavily involved in indigenization processes, but that research and the centring of student voices on this subject has been limited (Efimoff, 2022). We appreciate the four policy recommendations that Efimoff (2022) offers:

ensure authentic Indigenous student representation is foundational in Indigenization processes; acknowledge the impact of engagement with Indigenization on Indigenous students and work with them to mitigate it; co-create a community that can Indigenize; and make Indigenous knowledges and values fundamental in Indigenization processes. (p. 21)

Students in Efimoff’s (2022) study stressed the importance of “privileging Indigenous values including spirituality, self-determination, future-looking culture and community in the university” (p. 12) as ways of incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing into the academy.

Through a scan of post-TRC activity in Canadian universities, Newhouse and Abbott (2024) found that much of the work of indigenization thus far fits into Gaudry and Lorenz’s (2018) categories of inclusion indigenization or reconciliation indigenization. Our literature review has led us to the same conclusion, but, like others, we acknowledge that progress has been

made, and that Indigenous scholars, communities, and allies see the potential for transformational change. Student perspectives, while largely absent, are critical in this discussion (Dei & Cacciavillani, 2024).

METHODS

In the winter semester of 2020, and with the support of Dr. Kim Anderson, a small group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous student researchers conducted three focus groups with University of Guelph students on the subject of decolonizing the academy (ethics approval: REB #19-12-013). We chose to do focus groups as we wanted to encourage a generative discussion among students that would allow for an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2013).

Drawing on effective outreach methods used by the university's Indigenous Student Centre, participants were recruited using posters, classroom outreach to professors and students, and calls that were shared widely on the Indigenous Student Centre's listserv to encourage Indigenous representation. In total, 47 students expressed interest in participating, with 10 undergraduate and six graduate students ultimately partaking ($n = 16$). We intended to offer an Indigenous student-only focus group to foster a more comfortable environment for them, but this did not transpire due to a communication error. Instead, there were two focus groups with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants ($n = 3$, $n = 4$) and one focus group with non-Indigenous students ($n = 9$). Snacks and a \$25 gift card were provided.

It is worth noting that the students who participated self-selected, were most likely already interested in decolonization, and may not represent the majority of the student body (Godlewska et al., 2020). Our intention, however, was to get a window into student perspectives on decolonizing the institution and not a representative sampling of the campus student population. As our intention was to invite the broadest range of limitations and possibilities, we asked only four open-ended questions, which we followed with prompts when necessary.

1. What is your understanding of what decolonization is?
2. What is the first thing that comes to mind when we ask what needs to happen to decolonize the university?
3. What are some of the key experiences that have shaped your experience with de/colonization?
4. How can we connect our learning in this focus group/project, as well as the physical spaces we are learning in, to the larger project of de/colonization?

The focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed by the researchers and stored and shared on the secure MS Teams Platform. An amended six-stage coding and analysis approach was conducted to perform thematic analysis on the focus group data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Authors Imai and Traynor transcribed the data during the first stage. Then Crawford, Imai, and Traynor read and re-read each focus group (FG) transcript and made notes around areas of interest. In the third stage, the previously mentioned team of three went through the FG transcripts and did inductive coding simultaneously, after which they came together to compare and determine initial common codes. In the fourth stage, Crawford, Imai, Fowlie, Rochefort, and Traynor sorted the codes into potential overarching themes and subthemes. Crawford and Imai then conducted the fifth stage of reviewing the themes, combining overlapping themes, dissolving themes that did not have enough data, and refining and naming themes and subthemes. In this stage they organized the data within the themes to tell a story. In the final stage, authors Crawford and Imai wrote the themes into the Findings section.

FINDINGS

The three overarching themes we identified were as follows: (1) Institutional responsibility to act, (2) challenging institutional structures, and (3) making decolonization/indigenization efforts visible.

Institutional Responsibility to Act

Participants across the three focus groups expressed that the University of Guelph is responsible for participating in decolonizing efforts, noting “the university needs to put their money where their mouth is” (FG3, Participant 7). Students consistently stressed, without specificity, the importance of institutional responsibility to undertake decolonizing efforts and to be accountable and transparent in those actions. Some students referred to “opposing forces” that they identified as problematic, such as “lip service” (promises made but little action following), reluctant faculty engagement, and conflicting university priorities.

Accountability

Students stressed that the university needs to be accountable by creating a measurable plan for action items to ensure that all staff, faculty, and students are committed to decolonization:

[it's about] getting the university on our side and them owning up to the absence of decolonial spaces...[acknowledge] yes, this was built on the back of Indigenous people... rather than them saying we're in this age of reconciliation. It's like, how are you going to implement that? (FG1, Participant 1)

Among their calls for accountability, students discussed the need for decolonization efforts to be mandatory, then spoke to the issue of including more Indigenous content in the curriculum. They mentioned the responsibility of faculty to do this work, stating, “it's really going to take some commitment and thinking...it shouldn't just be optional, or there shouldn't be the cop-out of ‘well that person has tenure, so there's nothing that we can do’” (FG1, Participant 2).

Participants made the point that mandatory decolonization efforts, such as participation in anti-Indigenous racism training and scaffolding Indigenous content across curriculums would ensure that all faculty members are participating, and not just Indigenous faculty and staff. They also expressed the need for the university to be accountable for monitoring the percentage of Indigenous content within each course syllabus and program, stating:

It would be interesting to look at what percentage of course content engages with Indigenous theory, knowledge, and stuff like that...whether or not you make it explicitly mandatory, you need this percentage of content to focus on Indigenous people. (FG2, Participant 3)

Such monitoring would allow for the evaluation of which courses are still lacking in their incorporation of Indigenous content.

The participants pointed out that the university must be accountable to the campus community during decolonization efforts, and some called for dismantling what they saw as the rigid structures of senior leadership (the board of governors, associate vice-presidents, president, etc.) that appear to resist change. These students perceived the institution as too dysfunctional and untrustworthy to undertake decolonizing work. They suggested the creation of advisory committees that include representation from local Indigenous communities who could be responsible for overseeing progress on decolonial efforts on campus. One student remarked, “if it's just the same group of White guys who's up at the top of the circle...it is dysfunctional from the beginning...[have] students and elders' council...that's who that accountability sits with” (FG1, Participant 2).

Some of the students were unsure of what accountability would look like; they simply expressed that accountability measures were necessary. They called for “greater accountability; otherwise, the policy makers are just going to keep commissioning these things to make it look like we're doing something when it's still the same situation” (FG3, Participant 1). Some

felt that when discussing the institutional need for accountability and responsibility to act, the university must re-evaluate its financial investments as an indicator of decolonization efforts. Many study participants called for the university to fund decolonial actions and ensure their investments align with decolonial practices. Students believed it was hypocritical for the university to invest in fossil fuels while claiming to be committed to indigenizing, especially given the student perspective that investing in fossil fuels contributes to social injustices against Indigenous Peoples.

For the Indigenous participants, the question of investments raised more significant questions around respect for Indigenous ways of knowing, honouring agreements, and building equitable relationships with Indigenous Peoples. Every Indigenous student who participated in the focus groups called for the university to align its investments in a way that would respect Indigenous land stewardship and sovereignty. They saw this as part of the ethical conduct that decolonizing efforts with Elders, the Indigenous Student Advisory Council, and Indigenous community partners require:

The first step in decolonization is to care...to care about land, one another, water, and everything around us. It looks like honouring agreements and coming together and being able to negotiate from an equal playing ground. (FG1, Participant 2)

Transparency

The focus group participants called for developing a strategic plan that would outline decolonial efforts and would include timelines. They also stressed that more than a plan was needed, suggesting that the plan must be shared widely and put into action for any real change to occur. Some were confused as to whether there were current strategic planning groups and committees taking place. Some expressed the importance of sharing the university's progress toward decolonization. They suggested advertising a strategic plan through passive programming

(programming that requires zero or minimal in-person facilitation allows for spontaneous and occasional participation), noting this would increase student awareness of what the campus was doing to decolonize, and would get them engaged in decolonization efforts:

Passive programs on campus is something that really works. And we can push into all sorts of buildings on campus that have TVs. Once a week put something different up there. That's all you really need, because it puts information out there. People see that and people can engage with it. Put a QR code, put a link to the bottom of it. (FG2, Participant 2)

The students repeatedly stressed the importance of the university being forthcoming with what efforts are being undertaken and being open to public scrutiny. Reflecting on this kind of transparency, one student said, "these things are all helpful in promoting action" (FG2, Participant 3), and others commented that this would help them to feel empowered and to engage in the work. One participant stated, "you can go out yourself and make a change, but if you know you have the support of the institution, you are able to effect change on a larger scale" (FG2, Participant 2).

CHALLENGING INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES

Some participants stated that, due to the inherent colonial nature of the university, anything done by the university would be colonial. These students suggested that changes were needed to the university to challenge the institutional structure, and they referred to the areas of funding allocations, faculty support, course content, and what they referred to as "the colonial space of the university." The discussions did not include specific recommendations or insights into how decolonization could occur at the structural level of administration and funding. In terms of challenging colonial space, however, the top-

ic of awareness came up repeatedly. Students spoke generally of the need to continue to raise awareness about the context of colonialism on university campuses and beyond. They identified that it is necessary to move “beyond just territorial acknowledgements” (FG2, Participant 3), as land acknowledgements were perceived as a “check box” item and therefore not decolonial action.

The students noted that to begin challenging colonial structures, one needs to understand past and present-day colonial practices and actions:

We still talk more often about colonization as a past process; we don't think about when the last residential school was closed.... So much in discussion of Indigenous rights and sovereignty is thrown into the past.... It's not pulled forward and put into course material. (FG2, Participant 2)

Some students' comments indicated that they couldn't articulate the difference between what was meant by colonized and decolonized spaces. One non-Indigenous student stated, “I feel like I didn't see anything as colonized...I feel like there's something that I'm missing that needs to be explained to me in order to answer the full question” (FG1, Participant 3). The Indigenous student participants were clearer and more explicit about the ongoing presence of colonialism. They asserted that it is essential that non-Indigenous people take ownership of the legacies of settler colonialism to move forward in “re-righting those wrongs...of the colonial framework” (FG1, Participant 1).

The participants stated that faculty hiring and training is one tangible means of changing colonial systems, as hiring more Indigenous Peoples can help to infuse post-secondary institutions with more diverse perspectives. They spoke of a need for hiring faculty with experience working with Indigenous content and conducting research with Indigenous communities. They also suggested mandating training on anti-oppression cultural competency and increasing faculty capacity to facilitate difficult

conversations in the classroom. This would support an environment where Indigenous issues can be incorporated into course content without adding an increased risk to Indigenous students.

Indigenous students spoke of the harm in feeling pressured to respond when Indigenous topics are brought up in class; they talked about the discomfort of feeling other students' eyes on them (FG2). The post-secondary environment that places Indigenous students in a position to respond to matters relating to their identity can also foster feelings of self-doubt, as one student stated:

One of the things that has also shaped my experience is my Indigeneity being questioned. In official processes or contexts...it becomes really disempowering, it makes you doubt yourself...it makes me doubt myself and it makes everything harder 'cause you're climbing back out of a hole...then I think, “Oh, maybe I'm really not Indigenous enough” or “Maybe I don't really deserve to talk about this.” (FG1, Participant 2)

The students in our study also spoke of witnessing harms, including student tangents about stereotypes of criminal activity on a reserve, or denial of a student's identity on the basis of their appearance. They noted that these incidents were not addressed by their professors.

Challenging colonial structures means creating safer spaces and places for Indigenous Peoples, knowledges, and pedagogies within the curriculum, as noted by this student, who called for:

creating spaces for Indigenous knowledge across the entire spectrum and building experiences for students to do walking tours and engage in what they wouldn't have in a traditional, you know, social sciences course.... Different ways of learning, different ways of teaching, and that requires change from instructors too. (FG2, Participant 3)

Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants agreed that Indigenous content needs to be integrated across multiple units of any course. The relegation of Indigenous content to one unit or one week in a semester is something that some participants saw as performative. As one student stated:

I've noticed that in every class that I've ever taken, it's always one specific unit dedicated to Indigenous studies...I think it should be distributed throughout and not just, okay, we're going to throw a little, some little side chapter on Indigenous studies. (FG3, Participant 6)

By incorporating Indigenous content throughout the course, faculty can challenge the colonial centring of Western knowledge.

Students also identified that the university needs more courses that centre Indigenous pedagogy and content. One student said, "I would like to see more classes that are geared toward Indigenous knowledge or being out on the land.... That's one thing that Guelph lacks, is Indigenous studies or more Indigenous courses" (FG1, Participant 1). Some of the students felt strongly about scaffolding Indigenous content into all courses. One student stated "I feel like you'd be able to easily, through every subject, relate it back to Indigenous relations and colonization" (FG3, Participant 9).

Students expressed the need for critical conversations about decolonization, noting that decolonization efforts require unlearning and that this can often be uncomfortable. As one student stated, "I think that...people being uncomfortable is really important, because if people stay comfortable, change doesn't happen" (FG1, Participant 2). Others noted that professors needed competency in this area; that facilitating difficult conversations must be done respectfully and intentionally. They called for "some type of preemptive training on how to engage and teach this stuff properly, but also how to deal with these difficult microaggressions that inevitably pop up" (FG2, Participant 2).

Another action identified by the participants was for the university to demonstrate allyship by working with and supporting Indigenous communities fighting contemporary injustices:

Research isn't just about reproducing knowledge, or just about changing perspectives, but it's about changing structures and improving the lives and furthering the political objectives and goals of Indigenous communities...I would like to see the [institution] build ways to build bridges of solidarity and support what Indigenous communities are doing. (FG2, Participant 3)

The students called for the teaching of Indigenous research methods in graduate and undergraduate classes and suggested the incorporation of community-engaged research and scholarship in the classroom to learn how to better work with Indigenous communities in a decolonial, non-extractive manner. One student pointed out that "you never hear about Indigenous research methods at an undergraduate level," noting "it's important to bring these perspectives into other areas of research so people can incorporate and understand them more" (FG3, Participant 2).

Finally, the Indigenous focus group participants expressed the need to centre Indigenous ways of knowing, knowledges, and traditions as a daily practice. They spoke of implementing *Mino Bimaadiziwin*, a word in Anishinaabemowin described by one Indigenous graduate student as "living how spirit wants us to as the centre of our daily practice" (FG1, Participant 2) and "connection with the lands" (FG1, Participant 1).

MAKING DECOLONIZATION EFFORTS VISIBLE

Participants continually stressed that decolonizing the campus means enhancing Indigenous visibility and accessibility. They commented that decolonization should not be limited to measures such as increasing Indigenous art on campus. They pointed out that decolonization

through visibility needs to become “a practice,” and suggested bringing more Indigenous music, singing, and drumming into campus experiences (FG2). They also vocalized interest in creating walking tours to highlight and engage in decolonization efforts on campus. These tours could encourage conversations around Indigenous artworks that students might not be exposed to in a typical classroom experience. There was a desire to have an increased integration of cultural practices within university events to have people feel “more immersed in Indigenous culture” (FG1, Participant 3). Many students were interested in integrating a wider variety of cultural foods in hospitality services and dining halls across campus throughout the school year instead of relegating them to culturally significant months or days, as is the current practice.

One of the things the students said they would like to see is better visibility of the Indigenous Student Centre, as this would demonstrate the university’s support for Indigenous representation on campus. They commented on the value of having a central location to ease accessibility to programs and supports, noting how removed the current Centre feels. One Indigenous student stated:

You know, it’s funny. I’ve actually heard this talked about at other institutions as an “academic reservation”...these places for Indigenous people to hang out on campus often aren’t integrated into the hub of campus. They tend to be tucked away. (FG2, Participant 3)

According to one student, (FG2, Participant 3), increasing Elders’ and Indigenous presence on campus is another measure that would make decolonization efforts visible. They saw this as both an “everyday” and “structural” process of decolonization, as it would encourage student access to Indigenous ways of knowing that aren’t typically available in the classroom.

Within these suggestions, the students noted that increasing visibility on campus can be problematic if it creates an increased burden on Indigenous Peoples. This burden is a particular concern for the Indigenous faculty and stu-

dents, and the students commented on how it is essential to respect Indigenous faculty’s time and projects:

Why do Indigenous scholars have to be the one to carry the burden? They end up doing all this extra service work, like that happens at all universities, and I just think...we’re asking Indigenous scholars to do things that they really shouldn’t have to do. (FG2, Participant 3)

These comments bring us back to the larger message we heard about the institution needing to take responsibility, which we will discuss in the next section.

DISCUSSION

We set out to explore student experiences and perspectives on decolonizing within our institution; much of what our research participants told us is in keeping with the literature that primarily reflects the perspectives of scholars, faculty, and administrators, and fits within the categories of inclusion and reconciliation indigenization on the Gaudry and Lorenz (2018) spectrum, while offering glimpses of decolonial indigenization. From the standpoint of students, however, there are suggestions that reflect their particular experiences.

Overall, comments from the students were in line with literature that suggests the university has a responsibility to take on the work of decolonization and must make the work an institutional priority (Pidgeon, 2016, 2022). Their responses indicated that they are aware of the pressures of indigenizing work, and they made it clear that this work should not be reliant on the labour of Indigenous Peoples. Echoing the work of Lavalee (2020), Indigenous and non-Indigenous students alike expressed concern about the burden placed on Indigenous faculty to lead decolonization efforts for fear of risking Indigenous faculty burnout and poor retention. As noted in other studies (Cote-Meek, 2020; Efimoff, 2022; Debassige & Brunette Debassige, 2018; Styres & Kempf, 2022), the students stated that the work of decolonization should be taken up broadly by all faculty, staff, and students to re-

lieve some of the burden placed on Indigenous faculty. Their comments were in keeping with frameworks that call for relational responsibility on the part of institutions and allies (Mitchell et al., 2018; Pidgeon, 2016).

As consumers of curriculum, the students called for the implementation of some of the emerging approaches identified by Brunette-Debassige et al. (2022), including incorporating Indigenous knowledges and perspectives across the disciplines, capacity building through curriculum support and informal learning/unlearning opportunities, and mandatory Indigenous course requirements. They were clear, however, that they want more than cursory inclusion; this is in keeping with the work of White and Castleden (2022), who have identified that isolating content into distinct Indigenous courses, or “weaving *some* Indigenous content into a few courses” (p. 650) is not enough to decentre Western epistemologies and pedagogies. The students suggested scaffolding Indigenous content throughout courses to provide a more robust engagement, an experiment that has been implemented at the University of Guelph to some success (Perchak et al., 2025). They stressed that it is important to speak of both historic and contemporary colonialism, as relegating colonialism to the past can be a way of dismissing ongoing harms and avoiding meaningful change.

Student participants called for faculty and staff on campus to be trained so that they can engage with Indigenous content in meaningful ways while having the capacity to facilitate difficult conversations about the reality of colonialism. From these student perspectives, there is clearly more room for what Kerr and Parent (2022) describe as “troubling colonial dominance” (p. 286) with an embodied, relational approach to teaching that encourages relationships among Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners and allows for generative learning.

The value of providing student voices on decolonization came through in comments of everyday experiences about the harm they see on campus and in their classrooms. As with the student participants in Bailey’s (2016) and Efimoff’s (2022) works, our student participants spoke of Indigenous student burden to take on

indigenization, and, like students in other institutions, the Indigenous students experienced racism and microaggressions (Bailey, 2016; Canel-Cinarbaş & Yohani, 2019; Clark et al., 2014; Efimoff & Starzyk, 2025; Park & Bahia, 2022). Based on these comments, and considering ongoing ignorance (Godlewska et al., 2020) it is essential that institutions find ways of educating students and faculty alike.

One finding of our research that we did not see reflected in the literature was student frustrations about never feeling Indigenous enough to speak up about Indigenous issues because they do not fit the stereotypical image or because they have grown up in an urban environment. This is related to the discomfort Indigenous students often feel at being singled out to respond when Indigenous content is discussed in the classroom. This issue has been identified over time (Park & Bahia, 2022), and yet it persists.

While students may not wish to be visible as informants (Chatterjee et al., 2022) in the classroom, participants in this study did call for more visibility of Indigenous Peoples and initiatives on campus. Their suggestions for engagement with spatial markers, like art, signage, and language challenge, what Dei and Cacciavillani (2024) have referred to as the racially marked “spatial imagination within the university”: what can be seen on the walls, boardrooms, and public spaces (p. 218). The students’ calls for more visibility also indicated it is essential to see the evidence of indigenization and decolonization on campus—a need that was made clear as they were unaware of much of the decolonization and indigenization efforts currently underway at our university. They called for strategic plans, unaware that this work was already being done. Our findings indicate a need for more transparency and visibility to let students and others know when work is underway.

Returning to the big picture, it was striking that students expressed so much skepticism about the university’s commitment to decolonization. There was a great deal of concern that the university was making statements but not taking action. The students believed that while reconciliation and indigenization efforts had started, the resources and motivation to con-

tinue this work into the future were not guaranteed. This skepticism among participants raises questions about how students' perceptions about the possibilities of meaningful change might impact their decisions to be involved, or not, in decolonizing efforts. Pidgeon (2022) signals a reticence within this question she was asked as a doctoral student: "Why are Indigenous peoples even trying to be here if it's such a bad place for them?" (p. 15). Yet both the informed critique about the possibility of decolonizing universities, and affirmations about the importance of these same decolonizing and indigenizing efforts are necessary (Cote-Meek & Moeke-Pickering, 2020; Côté et al., 2021; Efmoff, 2022; Peach et al., 2020).

Finally, we were limited in our efforts to get students to define "decolonization" in the most transformative sense. Some expressed that everything universities do is colonial because they are colonial institutions, but they did not offer concrete examples of how this looks in their lived experiences. These comments indicated they were willing to question the limits of the university as a potential site of decolonization, while demanding honest and tangible actions on institutional commitments. The lack of clarity in students' recommendations also highlights the limitations of asking students to make institutional suggestions when even faculty are struggling with the burden associated with the task and raises questions of how students might be better informed and engaged about the indigenizing and decolonizing work of post-secondary institutions.

CONCLUSION

The students we spoke to identified a need for indigenization across the Gaudry and Lorenz (2018) spectrum but remained skeptical about progress. They required support and were looking to institutions as well as Indigenous leadership to take responsibility and provide guidance in the work of indigenization. This data, collected in 2020, offers us an opportunity now to consider how efforts in our institution over the last five years measure up against these student hopes and expectations.

Several of the inclusion and reconciliation indigenization initiatives suggested by the students and others have been implemented over the last five years. The office of Indigenous Initiatives and the role of Associate Vice-President of Indigenous Initiatives were created in 2022, the *Bi-Naagwad | It Comes Into View* strategy completed and endorsed by the university Senate in 2021 (University of Guelph, 2021). The Senate now seats two Indigenous students and one faculty. There have been several new Indigenous faculty and staff hires as a part of a Black and Indigenous hiring initiative, and we see more Indigenous art and language installed across campus. Departments and colleges are looking to build capacity through sessions to build and embed Indigenous curriculum, with the assistance of an Indigenous curriculum consultant. Perhaps most aligned with decolonial approaches, our Bachelor of Indigenous Environmental Science and Practice involves land-based learning, and faculty, staff, and students from across campus have been making use of a teaching lodge and sacred fire recently installed in the university's arboretum. The Nokom's House Research Centre, a land-based facility modelled on an Indigenous grandmother's home, is opening in the fall of 2026. How these changes are being experienced by students, and whether they offer more on the decolonial indigenization end of the spectrum remains to be seen, and inspires us to keep asking questions.

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