

## Key Terms: Reconciliation, Indigenization, Decolonization, and Resurgence

Since the conclusion of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) in 2015, universities across the country have been considering how to respond to its [94 Calls to Action](#). Given the TRC's focus on the residential school system that, for more than a century, removed Indigenous children from their families and placed them in institutions that attempted to eradicate Indigenous languages, knowledges, and the peoples themselves, many of the Calls to Action target matters of education. Although initiatives happening at Canadian universities today have sometimes been given new names and increased attention, this work is indebted to the longstanding efforts of Indigenous peoples working in the academy, knowledge-keepers, and communities who have been advocating for institutional change for decades.

This document provides a brief overview of key terms used to describe universities' responses to the TRC's Calls to Action. Each of these terms is subject to debate. Moreover, it is important to note that these words are based in the English language and may not effectively convey the values of all Indigenous peoples. The project of transforming universities is therefore inherently complicated by the fact that English remains the dominant language through which such change is often framed. For this reason, it is important to listen to the terms that Indigenous peoples themselves use to describe the changes they would like to see.

### 1.) Reconciliation

**Definition:** This term came into use in the post-WWII period to mark socio-political processes of healing and transformation in the wake of gross human rights violations and major political conflicts. In Canada, reconciliation has come to signify a process of grappling with colonialism and forging better relationships between the Government of Canada (as well as society more broadly) and Indigenous peoples. The TRC “defines *reconciliation* as an ongoing process of establishing and maintaining respectful relationships. A critical part of this process involves repairing damaged trust by making apologies, providing individual and collective reparations, and following through with concrete actions that demonstrate real societal change” ([Honouring the Truth](#), 2015, p. 16).

**Debates:** Unfortunately, “reconciliation” is used in very different ways by different constituencies. The Government of Canada often uses the term to suggest that colonialism is over and that the government's relationship with Indigenous peoples has now changed for the better. However, others contend that reconciliation operates as a “[politics of distraction](#),” obscuring the fact that colonialism has not ended (Corntassel & Holder, 2008, p. 472). For many Indigenous peoples, righting colonial wrongs involves much more than symbolic gestures; it necessitates fiscal compensation, the return of significant portions of land, and meaningful recognition of Indigenous rights to self-determination.

The etymology of the word “reconciliation” also makes its application to the Government of Canada's relations with Indigenous peoples problematic. First, the “re” in “reconciliation” suggests a return to a previously amicable state of relations that, many scholars assert, never existed in the context of colonization ([Chrisjohn & Wasacase](#), 2009, p. 222). Additionally, the word “reconciliation” is steeped in Catholicism, where it signifies a sacrament through which sinners are “[reconciled with the Church](#)” (Garneau, 2012, p. 35). Some Indigenous peoples

contend that the term “conciliation” is more appropriate because it “acknowledge[s]” that conflict has occurred and that “distrust” must be “overcome” ([Amagoalik](#), 2008, p. 93).

### Further Reading:

Jewell, E., & Mosby, I. (2019, December 17). *Calls to Action Accountability: A Status Update on Reconciliation*. Yellowhead Institute. <https://yellowheadinstitute.org/2019/12/17/calls-to-action-accountability-a-status-update-on-reconciliation/>

Manuel, A., & Derrickson, R., Grand Chief. (2017). *The Reconciliation Manifesto: Recovering the Land, Rebuilding the Economy*. James Lorimer and Company.

## 2.) Indigenization

**Definition:** Indigenization is a term that has emerged since the early 2000s to signal the process of increasing the presence of Indigenous peoples and knowledges in traditionally Euro-Western institutions. The phrase “Indigenizing the university” has become popular since the TRC’s Calls to Action recommended many changes in post-secondary education in order to respect, value, and promote Indigenous languages, knowledges and perspectives. Indigenization should be led by Indigenous peoples and should respect Indigenous intellectual sovereignty—namely, Indigenous leadership and self-determination—regarding the teaching and study of Indigenous knowledges, languages, and methodologies.

**Debates:** In post-TRC Canada, the often well-intentioned rush to “Indigenize the university” has, thus far, engendered mixed results. While many universities have sought to hire more Indigenous faculty and staff and recruit more Indigenous students, Indigenous peoples remain a minority within post-secondary institutions. Such policies of inclusion risk reducing Indigenization to a “tokenized checklist response that merely tolerates Indigenous knowledge(s)” ([Pidgeon](#), 2016, p. 78), leaving the Eurocentrism of the university intact. Moreover, the push for non-Indigenous instructors to incorporate Indigenous knowledges into their curriculum may enable new ways of appropriating Indigenous knowledge and “de-contextualizing it into various objects of Western knowledge expansion” ([FitzMaurice](#), 2011, p. 72). In its best forms, Indigenizing the academy involves robust institutional transformation guided by Indigenous leadership with a goal of fostering widespread institutional respect for the diversity of Indigenous peoples, knowledges, and methodologies.

### Further Reading:

Battiste, M. (2016). *Visioning a Mi’kmaw Humanities: Indigenizing the Academy*. Cape Breton University Press.

Gaudry, A., & Lorenz, D. (2018). Indigenization as inclusion, reconciliation, and decolonization: Navigating the different visions for indigenizing the Canadian Academy. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 14(3), 218-237. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1177180118785382>

Mihesuah, D. A., & Wilson, A. C. (Eds.). (2004). *Indigenizing the Academy: Transforming Scholarship and Empowering Communities*. University of Nebraska Press.

Pete, S. (2016). 100 ways: Indigenizing and Decolonizing Academic Programs. *Aboriginal Policy Studies*, 6(1), 81-89. <https://doi.org/10.5663/aps.v6i1.27455>

### 3.) Decolonization

**Definition:** This term is typically associated with the mid-twentieth century wave of processes through which subjugated peoples in colonies of occupation sought to attain political independence. It is vital to note that in settler colonial nation-states like Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand, such structural decolonization has never occurred; the same settler government systems imposed upon pre-existing sovereign Indigenous nations and their lands continue to remain in power today. In its most robust sense, therefore, decolonization involves nothing less than the dismantling of colonial power structures, be they political, epistemic, or social, with the ultimate goal of “repatriati[ng] ... Indigenous land and life” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 1).

When the term decolonization is used in academic contexts, it typically refers to theoretical, methodological, and praxis-centered approaches that actively decentre the dominance of Euro-Western structures of knowing. Decolonizing the university requires a rigorous dismantling of the ways that “the invisibilized dynamics of settler colonialism mark the organization, governance, curricula, and assessment of compulsory learning” in post-secondary institutions (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 2). It also requires a stock-taking of “how settler perspectives and worldviews get to count as knowledge and research and how these perspectives—repackaged as data and findings—are activated in order to rationalize and maintain unfair social structures” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 2).

**Debates:** Some academics have argued that, before Eurocentric institutions can become respectful environments for engaging with Indigenous knowledges and methodologies, these institutions must first identify their colonial histories and challenge the myriad ways in which they reproduce settler colonial power (George, 2019). Without specifying a sequential order, other scholars contend that decolonization and Indigenization are complementary projects (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018). Some scholars caution against the metaphorization of decolonization—namely, using this word too frequently as a synonym for other important, but not substitutable, social justice projects (Tuck & Yang). This critique seeks to preserve the specificity and urgency of decolonization’s focus on the restoration of Indigenous land and self-determination.

#### Further Reading:

Monkman, L. (2018, April 6). What does decolonization mean? Our panel debates the buzzword. *CBC News*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/panel-debate-decolonization-meaning-1.4609263>

Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Zed Books.

#### 4.) Resurgence

**Definition:** Resurgence is a term that is invoked less by university administrators and institutional planners. However, this word is frequently used by many Indigenous scholars and activists. For this reason alone, resurgence is an important word to learn about. Broadly put, resurgence involves the “flourishment” of Indigenous knowledges, laws, languages, and practices as integral elements of Indigenous self-determination ([Simpson](#), 2011, p 17). Imagining resurgence as a multivalent project, Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Simpson avers: “We need to rebuild our culturally inherent philosophical contexts for governance, education, healthcare, and economy. We need to be able to articulate in a clear manner our visions for the future, for living as *Indigenous Peoples* in contemporary times. To do so, we need to engage in *Indigenous* processes, since according to our traditions, the processes of engagement highly influence the outcome of the engagement itself.... We need our Elders, our languages, and our lands, along with vision, intent, commitment, community, and ultimately, action. We must move ourselves beyond resistance and survival, to flourishment” (2011, pp. 16-17).

**Debates:** Some Indigenous intellectuals like Simpson and Yellowknives Dene scholar Glen Coulthard argue for a turn away from state-centered projects like reconciliation and toward resurgence within Indigenous communities as a key part of enacting decolonization ([Red Skin, White Masks](#), 2014, pp. 154-179). Other scholars, however, suggest that reconciliation and resurgence need not be mutually exclusive. Such scholars admit that although reconciliation can be used by the Canadian government to “perpetuate unjust relationships of dispossession, domination, exploitation, and patriarchy,” resurgence can be employed by Indigenous peoples to develop “transformative” modes of reconciliation that fundamentally re-orient political and social relations between Indigenous peoples and Canada ([Borrows, & Tully](#), 2018, p. 5).

#### Further Reading:

Corntassel, J. (2012). [Re-envisioning resurgence: Indigenous pathways to decolonization and sustainable self-determination](#). *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1(1), 86-101.

Simpson, L. B. (2017). [As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance](#). University of Minnesota Press.

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