

2018-2019 Pathways & Innovative Transfer Active Grants

Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer

Final Reflections Report

Project Number: 2018-08

Title of Project

Framework for Enhancing the Mobility of Indigenous Learners into Art and Design Education

Project Summary

Brief Project Summary

Responding to a recognized need to develop new transfer models and pathways for Indigenous learners into Art and Design degree programs, the project team is developing a Framework to enhance Indigenous learner mobility that will include flexible, holistic models and strategies for credit transfer, prior learning assessment and culturally relevant student supports. The Framework will have broad applicability within the postsecondary sector, but its specific goal is to enhance Indigenous learner access into art and design learning and other non-vocational degree programs.

Overall Reflections

Primary Goals

Building on existing research and established practices within the postsecondary sector for credit transfer and articulation, the goal of this project was to develop a framework for enhancing opportunities for Indigenous students by widening access to non-vocational degree learning within and for Indigenous learning communities across Ontario and beyond.

In the original proposal, the following components were identified:

- an analysis of gaps, opportunities and promising practices for credit transfer for Indigenous learners, with a focus on the development of pathways into flexible, interdisciplinary degree programs, using Art and Design education as a model;
- models and strategies to ensure “developed pathways lead to job opportunities and long term economic outcomes for transfer students” (ONCAT RFP);
- a framework for aligning Indigenous learning outcomes with Degree-Level Expectations that can be used to assess credit transfer between degree programs and diploma and certificate programs in colleges and Aboriginal institutes, as well as for assessing non-traditional or non-credit programs or learning (e.g., elders’ teachings);
- a model for prior learning assessment (PLAR) as well as a holistic portfolio model for recruitment and admissions into art and design;

- a model for “wrap around” student support services;
- strategies for providing culturally relevant experiential learning opportunities driven by learning outcomes that align with both curriculum and student goals.

The project was intended to support ONCAT’s goal of enhancing access for Indigenous learners by providing models and strategies that are scalable and replicable at other institutions. The two-year project also sought to build capacity for Indigenous pathway development as well as community engagement and consultation within and beyond the university, which are key to ensuring the project’s success and long-term sustainability.

Goal Progress Notes (Innovative Transfer)

While the work continues, completion of the Framework has been delayed, in part, by the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to support the shift to fully online curriculum delivery from March 2020 to April 2021.

However, the project work itself has also precipitated a shift in the emphasis and scope of the original proposal. As noted below, one of the key takeaways of the project is a recognition of the need to develop a wholistic approach and to reorient the conversations about student mobility, transfer and articulation from an emphasis on the assessment of learners to an assessment of the readiness of institutions to support the inclusion and success of Indigenous learners. Changes to policies and practices for articulation and transfer need to be situated within a process of decolonizing both individual institutions and the sector as a whole.

This observation was realized through the work of engaging with Indigenous communities, working with Indigenous faculty and staff at OCAD U and other postsecondary institutions, and being attentive to the guidance shared by Elders. This engagement has enabled a reexamination and critique of the goals proposed in the original application to ONCAT.

To take one example, the original goal of providing models and examples to ensure pathways lead to employability outcomes will be broadened to reflect the perceptions of Indigenous learners regarding the value of postsecondary education, particularly in relation to art and design education. By engaging in conversation with Indigenous students, parents, educators, artists and community leaders, we learned that learners’ educational goals are often centred on being able to make a meaningful contribution to their communities, and this may look different than a conventional understanding of employability.

The project team continues to work towards completion of the Framework and, in consultation with S. Brenda Small as external advisor, has developed a workplan to complete it by March 2021.

Outcomes (Innovative Transfer)

1. Contribution to knowledge and understanding of best practices and models for Indigenous learner mobility within sector

The project team has taken a collaborative and community-based approach, informed by principles of decolonizing methodologies, to identify and analyze promising practices for articulation, transfer and mobility support through the research and environmental scan components of the project. The literature review, which grounds the project in current scholarship in Indigenous epistemologies and Indigenous education, supports a broader analysis of gaps, opportunities and promising practices for credit transfer for Indigenous learners that isn't currently very present within the research literature in this area.

For the environmental scan component of the initiative, the project team used their knowledge of the sector to identify models for prior learning assessment, holistic portfolio review and Indigenous learning outcomes developed by other postsecondary institutions.

In addition to the framework itself, the work leading up to the development of the framework has involved knowledge-sharing with external partners through site visits and a symposium.

Indicators demonstrating achievement of outcomes:

- annotated bibliography
- environmental scan of models and practices identified at other postsecondary institutions
- ONCAT Final Report
- Indigenous Learners Pathways Framework (in development, to be completed by March 2021)
- 70 participants attended the Indigenous Students Pathways Symposium held at OCAD University, Toronto, in February 2020

2. Contribution to knowledge and practice at OCAD U

The project supported the hiring of an Educational Developer (Indigenous Learning). They brought expertise in Indigenous education, identified and developed relationships with partner institutions, and collaborated with Indigenous faculty and staff within OCAD U, and organized site visits to communities and postsecondary institutions in Peterborough, Thunder Bay and Sioux Lookout. This role has been established as a permanent role to ensure continued capacity for the work beyond the duration of the project.

An Advisory Committee was also struck to guide the work of the project by reviewing research and approaches from the post-secondary sector and participating in dialogue and community outreach initiatives to inform the development of the framework and accompanying resources. The Advisory Committee met regularly from September 2018 to April 2020. Three Indigenous faculty members were offered a course release for participation in this project from September 2018 to April 2020.

S. Brenda Small, Vice-President at the Centre for Policy and Research in Indigenous Learning, Confederation College, was invited to participate in the project as an External Evaluator and conducted three site visits during the project. Initially, she assessed the project plan and consulted with the research team and other campus stakeholders. In subsequent visits, she assessed draft components of

the framework and, finally, was asked to review the Final Report and prepare a response before submission to ONCAT.

Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers were invited to OCAD U to lead circles and share teachings. These circles were intended to build our collective experience with and relationship to Indigenous knowledges, pedagogies and protocols, providing important foundational experience and knowledge to inform the project work. It also enabled members of the project team, Advisory Committee and academic leadership to begin to develop relationships with Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers.

The project team established regular meetings of a reading group comprised of staff in the Faculty & Curriculum Development Centre to engage collaboratively in the research and share learning with each other. This reading group is ongoing.

Indicators demonstrating achievement of outcomes:

- permanent Educational Developer, Indigenous Learning role
- regular meetings of the Advisory Committee
- consultations with Indigenous Education Council
- Indigenous Elder circles
- regular meetings of reading group

3. Revision to and development of new policies and processes at OCAD U

A significant component of the work on the project has involved the development of Indigenous Learning Outcomes (ILOs). These were developed by OCAD U's Indigenous faculty and the Educational Developer for Indigenous Learning, in collaboration with members of the project team and in consultation with the Indigenous Education Council, and they inform a Wholistic Approach to Curriculum that is being adopted across the university.

The ILOs and the Wholistic Approach to Curriculum were shared with Elder Shirley Williams before they were approved by Senate in 2019. They were also blessed by Elder Ralph Johnson in a ceremony held during the Indigenous Students Pathways Symposium. Melanie Printup Hope, an artist of Tuscarora and European descent and faculty member at OCAD U, has been commissioned to prepare a beaded artwork based on Elder Johnson's blessing.

Moving forward, the project Advisory Committee will be reconstituted and expanded to advise the development and revision of new policies and practices at OCAD U informed by the Framework, including the development of an Indigenous Admissions Policy, Prior Learning Assessment Policy and related admissions processes for Indigenous applicants. The committee will also take up broad questions of Indigenous learner access to advocate for systemic change, including curricular renewal, that will accompany policy revision.

Indicators demonstrating achievement of outcomes:

- OCAD U's Indigenous Learning Outcomes and Wholistic Approach to Curriculum

- beaded artwork of the Indigenous Learning Outcomes (commissioned and in process)
- development of new and revised policies at OCAD U to support the mobility and success of Indigenous learners (in process)

4. Consultation and community engagement with Elders, community and postsecondary partners

Consultation within the university was achieved primarily through work with the Advisory Committee, whose members included the project team, three Indigenous faculty members, the Chair of the Indigenous Visual Culture program and the manager of the Indigenous Student Centre. Consultations were also undertaken with the university's Indigenous Education Council.

The project team also identified and engaged with external partners locally and provincially through site visits, three community roundtables and a symposium on Indigenous Pathways that was held in February 2020.

The project team also began to develop relationships with Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers throughout the process, and consulted with Elders at key stages of the project.

Indicators demonstrating outcomes:

- site visits to postsecondary institutions in Peterborough, Thunder Bay and Sioux Lookout
- community roundtables held in Peterborough, Sioux Lookout and Toronto
- Indigenous Elder and Knowledge Keeper circles and consultation meetings

Partnerships and Collaboration

Participating Institutions (Pathway Stream)

N/A

Main Collaborators (Innovative Transfer)

N/A

Changes to Collaborators (Innovative Transfer)

N/A

Collaborator Contributions (Innovative Transfer)

N/A

Pathway Development (if applicable)

Did this project aim to develop pathways? (Innovative Transfer)

No

Pathways Created (Innovative Transfer)

N/A

Incompleted Pathways (Innovative Transfer)

N/A

ONTransfer.ca information updated (Innovative Transfer)

N/A

ONTransfer Updates (Innovative Transfer)*

None

ONTransfer.ca pathways (anticipated) (Innovative Transfer)

N/A

Pathways Update Timeframe (Innovative Transfer)

N/A

Transfer Credit Courses (Innovative Transfer)

None

Credit equivalency updated on ONTransfer.ca (Innovative Transfer)

N/A

Credit Equivalency Update Timeframe (Innovative Transfer)

N/A

Outcomes and Implications

Student Outcomes (Innovative Transfer)*

The key takeaway of the project and the central argument of the Framework is the need for a wholistic approach to Indigenous learner mobility and education that focuses on the readiness of institutions to support the mental, physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing of Indigenous learners, in consideration of their whole educational journeys before coming into, during and after leaving their educational program.

Students, graduates, parents and community members shared stories and experiences that helped the project team to recognize the different kinds of value that learners see in their relationship to education. They also shared many experiences of racism, both in their individual interactions with other students, faculty and administrators, and also in relation to systemic policies, practices and attitudes. Institutional systemic racism reflects the historical and ongoing role of education in the colonial oppression of Indigenous peoples.

The wholistic approach of the Framework recognizes that any attempt to enhance opportunities for Indigenous learners to enter into postsecondary learning or to articulate into higher levels of learning

must be accompanied by changes to institutional policies and practices that recognize and value the knowledges and ways of knowing Indigenous learners bring with them, that provide wrap around student services that support the whole learner, and are situated within an intentional and systematic program of decolonizing institutional policies and processes, and curriculum.

By the same token, improved student outcomes for access into postsecondary education, credit transfer and articulation and retention (e.g., increased numbers of Indigenous learners in programs of learning) must be considered in relation to other, more qualitative indicators of improved student experience and success that reflect the wholistic approach of the Framework.

Institutional Outcomes (Innovative Transfer)*

As noted above, the project has had a significant impact on the knowledge and understanding of Indigenous learning broadly at the university, in part, through the support in hiring of an Educational Developer in Indigenous Learning, as well as through the development of OCAD U's Indigenous Learning Outcomes.

Moving forward, the project's Advisory Committee will be reconstituted as an Advisory Committee on Indigenous Learner Pathways to seek to implement the Framework at OCAD U. In the short term, this work will include the development of an Indigenous Admissions Policy (for Winter 2021) and revision to the Prior Learning Assessment (PLAR) Policy.

Sector or System Implications (Innovative Transfer)*

The Framework will advocate for changes to transfer and articulation practices at the sector level. The project has carried forward work already undertaken and shared by ONCAT-funded projects, including the Pathways for Indigenous Learners project led by S. Brenda Small at the Centre for Policy and Research for Indigenous Learning at Confederation College, in collaboration with institutional partners across Ontario, as well as the Indigenous Program Pathways Project led by Canadore College.

Our contribution to this ongoing conversation and the well-established work in this field is, in addition to an emphasis on wholism, a recognition that the educational journeys of many Indigenous learners are not linear and for many, completion of credentials may not be a primary goal and may not be possible. At the sector level, new models for learner mobility, transfer and articulation are needed in order to create greater flexibility and allow for more learner self-direction, and in the context of a decolonizing process that critiques and decentres conventional norms, assumptions and hierarchies that perpetuate systemic racism and create barriers for participation and success in learning.

With the above in mind, the Framework will seek to create greater fluidity across sector by advocating for:

- recognition of traditional and cultural knowledge as valid prior learning
- the 2 + 2 model for articulation agreements
- 1 to 1 credit transfer practice between colleges and universities

- access programs that lead to credit equivalencies for diploma and degree learning
- stackable micro-credentials that allow students to endeavor and combine smaller units of learning from multiple institutions that count towards certificates, diplomas and degrees
- review and revision of related academic policies and practices to ensure the wellbeing of Indigenous learners after transfer or articulation
- development of cultural and wrap-around supports based on successful models within the sector

Reflections on Action Plan

Key Steps (Innovative Transfer)*

Broadly, the project involved the following steps:

- formation of a project advisory committee, project plan and project research methodology;
- literature review and environmental scan
- series of Indigenous learner community roundtables around Ontario
- key informant interviews (internal and external)
- development of Indigenous Learning Outcomes
- analysis of findings
- hosting an Indigenous Student Pathways Symposium to share learnings
- development of an Indigenous Learners Pathway Framework

While the project team followed these steps overall, we learned early in the process that we would be required to adjust the action plan and generally treat the process more flexibly and iteratively to enable a strong focus on relationship building and dialogue, both within and outside the university. We also recognized, through consultation with Indigenous staff and faculty, that the engagement of Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers would play an important overall role in the project that was not fully anticipated. These changes to the project plan had an impact on project timelines, budget and outcomes. Please see below for further reflections on this.

One component of the original project action plan that we adhered to fairly closely was the development of a set of Indigenous Learning Outcomes (ILOs). The ILOs were developed through a series of collaborative and dialogical writing sessions such that the ILOs were written collectively. Importantly, the ILOs were shared with Elder Shirley Williams prior to being brought to the university community for further engagement. Although the ILOs were ultimately approved by the OCAD U Senate, they were not subject to typical consultation and feedback processes due to the recognition that they emerged from the specialized expertise of our Indigenous faculty, Elders and community partners.

Challenges (Final Report) (Innovative Transfer)*

The project's emphasis on community engagement and our commitment to an iterative, dialogical research and knowledge building process was a key strength of the project, shaping project outcomes in important ways. At the same time, this emphasis led to concrete challenges that could have been mitigated during the planning stage had we had a deeper understanding of the significance of relationship building to the process, and specifically, the extent to which it would shape and delay our original project timelines. See below for further reflections on this.

Similarly, the project involved significant learning about Indigenous knowledge production, community engagement and relationship building, as well as the role of Elder knowledges in the project. This learning involved not just the project team and the Advisory Committee but the university more broadly. Although we anticipated this dimension of the work, we underestimated the nature of this and

the extent to which it would require intentional change management practices to create the conditions necessary to achieve the project outcomes.

Finally, the project team also experienced challenges developing a culturally responsible and decolonizing research methodology and, in particular, achieving Research Ethics Board approval where the REB was invested in conventional academic research practices that were inconsistent with Indigenous ethics and community protocols. These challenges and the discussions that emerged from them were ultimately extremely fruitful, though, and we have developed a decolonizing research model that may be replicated for similar projects involving Indigenous community engagement and knowledge sharing in the future.

It is important to note that the input of our external evaluator, S. Brenda Small, was very important as we navigated these challenges. She brought deep expertise in not just Indigenous education, mobility and access but also institutional change. Her advice throughout this process was critical to our success.

Reflections (Innovative Transfer)*

Our emphasis on relationship building and Elder engagement shaped the project in several key ways, and led to important reflections that became part of the project work itself. First, this emphasis required that we generally take a less prescriptive approach to the consultation process where our relationships with Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers were built over time. This was not limited to relationship-building with project team members; it also required that we make space within the university community for faculty, staff and students to learn from Indigenous Elders. These Elder circles were not part of the original project plan but provided essential foundational knowledge sharing for the OCAD U community through which the rest of the project work could evolve. Finally, Elder engagement in the different project activities ensured that the project was accountable to community protocols and engaged meaningfully with Indigenous knowledge systems and expertise that is recognized by Indigenous communities.

This produced challenges for the project's sense of progress but these challenges were ultimately key learnings for the team, with implications for the research itself. For example, the time involved in relationship building did not run neatly alongside the project timelines. In some cases, where consultation was required for project milestones to advance, this created a sense of the work being delayed. In general, because our original project plan included careful timelines intended to ensure that the project was progressing and achieving key outcomes, the evolution of the relationship building components felt in conflict with the overall project needs. As the project progressed, however, we learned that it was our original project plan with its expectation that it would follow a more linear trajectory that was the issue. In effect, we came to understand that relationship-building was not simply supporting the project but was the true work of the project.

Knowledge Mobilization

Tools and Resources (Innovative Transfer)*

A number of resources were produced during the project; at the same time, it was recognized that the most important outputs were relational and process-oriented. These resources include: presentations, an environmental scan, Indigenous Learning Outcomes (aligned with Degree Level Expectations), Wholistic Approach to Curriculum and a research methodology. A commissioned beadwork project is also underway that will create a visual representation of the Indigenous Learning Outcomes to ensure that they have a material presence on campus; this beadwork project emerges directly from the ONCAT project findings. The process-oriented resources developed include: an Advisory committee structure that will extend beyond the duration of the project, dialogue and relationship-building, Indigenous Pathways Symposium, ceremony, shared language and goals around Indigenous learner access and

mobility, and embodied understanding of Indigenous Elder protocols and teachings. These resources will ensure that the project work is sustained beyond the project end date through a shared investment in institutional change. Finally, we are in the process of producing a Framework for Indigenous Learner Access and Mobility in Art and Design Education that will document our research methodology, share and reflect upon our learnings and offer a model for other institutions seeking to enhance access to post-secondary art and design education for Indigenous learners. The Framework has been delayed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic but will be shared with ONCAT when complete.

Sharing Learning (Innovative Transfer)*

As discussed above, the most important outputs of the project involved significant institutional learning through newly developed processes, relationships and the development of shared language and understanding. This foundational work will need to continue – and expand its reach – if we are to realize the vision and goals for enhanced access and mobility for Indigenous learners.

We began to share this work through an Indigenous Pathways Symposium in February 2020. This event brought community partners, students, Elders and Indigenous scholars and educators together with the OCAD U community to discuss questions of Indigenous learner access and systemic educational change required to enhance the mobility of Indigenous learners across the sector. The event also included a ceremony and feast to mark OCAD U's commitment to shaping systemic change within our institution and beyond, in collaboration with other post-secondary institutions and Indigenous communities. Our hope is to continue to convene community gatherings and ceremony as one way of sustaining the relationships enabled by this project and contributing to systemic change within the sector. We are also interested in working with ONCAT, and through other venues, to disseminate the research more broadly and use our findings to activate institutional and sector-wide change. This would require additional funding and resources.

The Framework itself will include concrete recommendations and next steps that include policy review, curricular change and student program development. These will need to be prioritized and phased based on institutional capacity and, in some cases, contingent on additional funding and resources.

There is also an opportunity to publish the findings in scholarly and professional publications.

Tips/Advice (Innovative Transfer)*

Our advice to other institutions builds upon our reflections and learnings above – that is, all efforts to increase Indigenous learner access and mobility must first focus on relationship building with Indigenous knowledges, communities and colleagues to serve as a foundation for that work. Through our research and critical engagement with Indigenous education and decolonizing scholarship, we would argue that the university must be learner-ready rather than expecting learners to be university-ready. This is particularly true for Indigenous learners where the colonial history of education is deeply embedded within institutional and curricular structures.

Without first building a respectful relationship to Indigenous knowledges, including through Elder engagement and experience with Indigenous protocols, the work of transforming the institution to enable Indigenous learner access can not be successful. This has material implications for project planning, timelines and approaches – outputs need to be reconceived to focus on process and timelines need to allow for these process-oriented outputs.

Advice for ONCAT

Funding Process (Innovative Transfer)*

Our experience of ONCAT's funding process was very positive. As a funder, ONCAT was flexible, well-informed, collaborative and receptive to the needs of our project. Prior to the final awarding of funds, the funding process was collaborative and ONCAT was very receptive to some key feedback we provided around faculty course releases, increasing the allowable budget for these course releases to recognize our institutional context and the unique expertise of our Indigenous faculty. This flexibility was greatly appreciated and proved to be crucial to the project's success. ONCAT demonstrated other flexibility throughout the project with respect to deadlines, as a result of both shifting project needs and, later, the pandemic. At times, the reporting templates and procedures caused some confusion and seemed cumbersome but any questions we had were addressed easily.

Student Mobility Field Support (Innovative Transfer)*

The implications for sector-wide practices related to access, mobility, transfer and articulation are described in the above section on Sector or System Implications. As noted there, the Framework will advocate for changes that will have broad implications for Indigenous learners' access to and ability to move between programs of learning, with a focus on enabling mobility through greater flexibility, learner self-direction and multilateral rather than linear movement.

Focus Areas (Innovative Transfer)*

Further work that focuses on transfer between colleges/universities and Indigenous Institutes, as well as other education systems within and beyond Ontario, is needed. In particular, projects that will help to contextualize new transfer pathways and agreements in relation to considerations of access for all learners, as well as decolonizing approaches, will lead to the development of new models for articulation and transfer that support Indigenous learners in particular and diverse learners broadly.

Work that explores the use of micro-credentials to support access and transfer might supplement existing articulation agreements by enabling more flexible, self-directed and multilateral movement between institutions and levels of learning.

Other Feedback (Innovative Transfer)

ONCAT has been very gracious in acknowledging the extra time and flexibility that was needed in light of the pandemic and the work involved in supporting the transition to fully online course delivery. We're very grateful to have had the support of ONCAT in undertaking this important work and look forward to sharing the final Framework once complete.