

Barriers to University Enrollment for Indigenous Students in Canada

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Abstract: Indigenous students in Canada face systemic, cultural, and economic barriers that significantly hinder their access, persistence, and success in higher education. This paper examines critical issues, including institutional racism, microaggressions, culturally irrelevant curricula, historical trauma, geographic isolation, and financial hardships. Systemic racism and inadequate support services marginalize Indigenous students, leading to high dropout rates, while the lack of culturally reflective curricula fosters disengagement. Historical trauma, rooted in the legacy of residential schools and settler colonialism, perpetuates exclusion, further limiting educational attainment. Students from rural and remote communities encounter additional challenges due to isolation and limited local resources, compounded by rising tuition costs and insufficient financial aid. Based on Indigenous perspectives, this research highlights the significance of resolving these disparities through targeted financing policies, recruiting more Indigenous faculty, anti-racism training, and sufficient support networks. Universities in Canada can promote inclusivity, reconciliation, and fair access to higher education for Indigenous students by putting these recommendations into practice.

Keywords: Indigenous Students; Higher Education; Systemic Barriers; Reconciliation; Canada

While existing scholarship frequently acknowledges the underrepresentation of Indigenous populations in academia, there remains a critical gap in synthesizing how systemic, cultural, and economic barriers intersect specifically within the evolving framework of Canadian reconciliation efforts. Indigenous students continue to encounter formidable systemic barriers that prevent them from succeeding academically, despite several programs aimed at enhancing assistance and accessibility. This paper investigates the multidimensional factors contributing to the underrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in Canadian universities, hoping to improve their educational experiences.

Our Philosophical Paradigm

Abiah's educational philosophy centers on fostering critical thinking, creativity, and inclusivity to prepare students for the complexities of the modern world. Rooted in Dewey's (1939) philosophy of education, Abiah believes that education should transcend rote learning and encourage students to think critically and engage deeply with knowledge. In a world where information is ever-evolving, Dewey's assertion that the primary goal of education is learning to think remains relevant. Dewey's emphasis on experiential learning aligns with Abiah's approach, which integrates real-world applications, project-based learning, and collaborative activities.

As an educator, Abiah sees her role as a guide who encourages students to question, analyze, and synthesize information. Collaborative activities that allow students to share diverse viewpoints foster an inclusive atmosphere that reflects Dewey's (1939) belief in democratic involvement in education. When Abiah worked as a teacher in India, she oversaw a project about building sustainable communities, where students worked together to find ways to solve local problems. Watching them discuss different ideas and listen to each other's views showed Abiah how important it is to teach them to think critically and include everyone's perspective in learning.

Ashna's educational philosophy focuses on positive teacher-student relationships that enhance learning outcomes. Her educational perspectives are mainly grounded in the Confucian ideology of filial love that could be expanded to the love of *ren* between teachers and students. Confucius (n.d.) suggests that good teacher-student relationships often emphasize love and are extended to others and a harmonious society. A strong teacher-student bond helps students to be better motivated, self-directed, and successful, in addition to making the classroom a safe and welcoming environment for all. In her article, Ma (2020) commented that the professor Mr. Zhao's relationship with her mother was not a typical trainer-trainee relationship. Instead, it was an emotionally charged, caring relationship that Confucian *ren* particularly embraced. Confucius' *ren* outlines the need for ethical engagement in teaching (Confucius, n.d.). This foundational virtue challenges today's teaching and teacher education discourses, where teachers are reduced to the role of mere regulators and disciplinarians. It invokes teachers to be "elevated as human beings devoted to forging truthful relationships with one another" (Ma, 2020, p. 230).

Ashna believes that for a student to receive meaningful learning experiences, they should be happy and free of stress. Teachers play a great role in making the students happy and tension-free. In a study that included a purposive sample of 300 orphan adolescents from seven orphanages and 300 non-orphan adolescents from a private school in South India, Akilandeswari and Annalakshmi (2023) found that a positive student-teacher relationship results in positive outcomes, including better academic functioning and better feelings about themselves. When Ashna worked as a teacher in a secondary school, she was surprised to find the rapport between teachers and students there; teachers were more like mothers to the students. Students were free to share any problems with their teachers, and the teachers were ready to listen to them patiently.

Our Educational Journey

Our research interest is closely tied to one of the most sensitive affairs concerning education in Canada—the Indigenous students in post-secondary education. We were acquainted with Indigenous history, culture, language, customs, traditions, and the challenges they face through diverse educational theories and scholars. Engaging with Critical Race Theory (CRT) was transformative, as it helped us understand how systemic inequalities shape educational experiences for marginalized groups. CRT's focus on examining power structures inspired us to explore how colonial legacies and institutional biases create significant hurdles for Indigenous students (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023).

The notions of equality versus equity, diversity, and inclusion and theories like posthumanism helped us get acquainted with different worldviews, including Indigenous perspectives, which emphasize relationality, respect, and community-based knowledge sharing. This exposure broadened our understanding of how traditional Western educational models often fail to resonate with Indigenous students' cultural and social values, leading to a sense of cultural disconnect. Also, the works of Indigenous writers like Beatrice Anderson and Leroy Little Bear inspired us to choose a topic concerning the Indigenous student population, reinforcing our desire to explore educators' roles in fostering equity and inclusivity. This personal and theoretical orientation provides the lens through which we now examine the broader scholarly discourse regarding the barriers persisting within the Canadian academy. In examining these barriers, we adopt an intersectional lens, recognizing that for many Indigenous students, the challenges of systemic racism are compounded by geographic isolation and socioeconomic status, necessitating a multifaceted institutional response.

Methods of Data Selection

The methodology used to conduct this literature review is the Thematic Analysis Grid proposed by Anderson, Lees, and Avery (2015), which helped to examine several articles and identify major themes, with a special emphasis on the institutional and socioeconomic obstacles that Indigenous students in higher education encounter. To identify the literature for this review, a systematic search was conducted across Google Scholar and ERIC using keywords such as "Indigenous Students," "Canadian higher education," "racism and microaggression," and "historical trauma." The selection was limited to peer-reviewed articles published between 2007 and 2024 that specifically addressed Indigenous enrollment and persistence primarily in Canada, with a secondary focus on Australia and the US. Following the selection of 15 peer-reviewed journal articles, the Thematic Analysis Grid proposed by Anderson et al. (2015) was utilized to categorize the findings into the five major themes: (a) racism and microaggressions, (b) cultural disconnect and curriculum irrelevance, (c) historical trauma and colonial legacy, (d) geographical isolation, and (e) economic barriers.

Literature Review

Our research aims to address systemic, cultural, and economic barriers affecting Indigenous students in Canadian universities. The study's significance extends beyond educational settings, addressing broader social and economic disparities, and aims to uncover pathways to make higher education more accessible, relevant, and inclusive for Indigenous populations. Closing the educational attainment gap is not only a matter of social justice, but also a vital economic imperative, as increasing Indigenous graduation rates can substantially bolster Canada's labor market and national GDP. Empowering Indigenous scholars through higher education facilitates a transition away from historical economic marginalization toward sustainable, community-led prosperity.

Grounded in our stated philosophical paradigm, this review employs a thematic analysis, guided by the framework developed by Anderson, Lees, and Avery (2015), to bridge personal insights with established academic literature. The analysis draws on peer-reviewed studies that examine Indigenous students' experiences in higher education, with a particular focus on institutional, cultural, and socioeconomic barriers. Indigenous students in Canada face significant challenges in accessing and succeeding in higher education, rooted in systemic racism, cultural disconnection, historical trauma, geographical isolation, and economic disadvantage (Bailey, 2016; Canel-Çınarbaş & Yohani, 2019; Gallop & Bastien, 2016; Walton et al., 2020; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Institutional racism, microaggressions, and insufficient support services contribute to unwelcoming academic environments that marginalize Indigenous students and are associated with higher dropout rates (Clark et al., 2014; Bailey, 2016). Furthermore, curricula that fail to reflect Indigenous knowledge systems and values deepen cultural disconnection, reducing student engagement and motivation (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Jaber et al., 2024; Kanu, 2007). The enduring effects of historical trauma—particularly the legacy of residential schools—continue to perpetuate cycles of exclusion (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

Additionally, Indigenous students from rural and remote communities face compounded barriers due to geographical isolation and economic hardship, which limit access to post-secondary institutions and contribute to lower enrollment rates (Nelson, 2018; Shankar et al., 2020; Robinson, 2023).

Racism and Microaggressions

Bailey (2016) argued that racism is creating ongoing barriers for Indigenous students within post-secondary institutions. The university system is limiting and marginalizing Indigenous students and issues and many of them feel that the university has not made enough progress to meet their needs or foster institutional change, which ultimately affects them adversely. Additionally, according to Gore et al. (2017), "experiences of racism within the university, stereotyping, and exclusion are all closely related to ongoing issues of access, participation, retention, and completion rates for Indigenous students" (p. 13).

Apart from racism, microaggression is cited as an important factor in the frustration and feelings of isolation that many Aboriginal students experience. Canel-Çınarbaş and Yohani (2018) investigated the experiences of racial microaggressions of Indigenous students in Canadian Universities. The study highlighted how victims of microaggressions face a dilemma of clashing realities, and this is particularly harmful in education settings where teachers and other authority figures are, at times, the perpetrators of such acts of violence. Throughout their schooling, the participants reported experiencing intentional acts of racism such as physical aggression, name-calling, mocking, and exclusion from school. Bailey (2016) noted that all the 17 interviewees who participated in the research study at McMaster University agreed that a lack of awareness and understanding (regarding Indigenous peoples and the related issues) was at the root of ongoing racism toward Indigenous peoples at the university.

Cultural Disconnect and Curriculum Irrelevance

The cultural disconnect is another critical barrier faced by Indigenous students. For Indigenous peoples, their culture is the core of their identity, affiliation, origins, and interpersonal relationships. According to a research study conducted in Canada on the key supports and obstacles related to Indigenous university student persistence that incorporated interview, survey, and database information with 527 Indigenous students, Walton, Hamilton, Clark, Pidgeon, and Arnouse (2020) found that "The cultural discontinuity between the city, the university, and the home community was a significant obstacle to persistence for many Indigenous students" (p. 444). Moving away from home to seek school can cause students to become disconnected from their culture and community, impacting their academic success. In Australia, Gore et al. (2017) explored the relevant empirical studies published between 2000 and 2016 that provided data on the participation of Indigenous students in higher education. This emphasizes the need to incorporate Indigenous knowledge, history, and culture into the Western academy to bridge the cultural disconnect between Indigenous students and the Western academy by valuing Indigenous learners' experiences and incorporating them into the curriculum in a meaningful manner. In this way, Indigenous learners will be better represented and engaged in their learning environment. Following the logic of Gore et al. (2017), we conclude that Indigenous learners are only truly represented when their cultural experiences are treated as foundational to the Western academy.

A study by Jaber, Stirbys, and Saint-Cyr (2024) that employed a quasi-experimental, mixed-methods design involving a total of 92 students in the Bachelor of Social Work program at a southwestern Ontario university suggested that the Indigenous pedagogy was linked with increased students' satisfaction and connectedness to the material and their peers and greater self-reflection. Recent initiatives aimed at integrating Indigenous knowledge into curricula are promising, but more work is needed to ensure relevance and inclusivity. Indigenous students stress that curriculum relevance and inclusiveness, contextually appropriate pedagogy, and a learning environment that promotes mutual respect with diverse faculty members are essential for their success (Pidgeon et al., 2014). Cultural disconnect can cause discomfort and create feelings of isolation for Aboriginal students, while relevance and inclusion can promote a sense of connection and engagement with the curriculum. Faculty training on these topics is also cited as essential for success.

Historical Trauma and Colonial Legacy

The historical trauma experienced by Indigenous communities continues to affect their educational outcomes. The enduring effects of past injustices like the residential school system are creating inter-generational trauma (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Canada has a lengthy history of colonialism and exclusion despite its reputation as a multicultural and inclusive society. Clark, Kleiman, Spanierman, Isaac, and Poolokasingham (2014) reviewed Indigenous undergraduates' experiences with racial microaggressions at a leading Canadian university and noted, "Canada today has not escaped settler colonialism, a historical and violent process of racialization in which Western European settlers laboured to displace Indigenous populations" (p. 112). Students face comments that even deny their cultural background and history. Bailey (2016) argued that the question was posed as to whether the university has made serious attempts to address its decolonization. This remains a major challenge that has adversely impacted Indigenous education in the past and even today.

Milne and Wotherspoon (2023) examined how Indigenous children and family members in Alberta perceive and comprehend academic performance in relation to the concepts of success promoted by school systems. They suggested that prospects for respectful reconciliation, as a pathway towards decolonization, necessitate not only an acknowledgment of the realities surrounding residential schools and the effects of colonization on Indigenous communities but also the capacity to recognize and challenge how contemporary schooling has reinforced settler colonialism. On examining the systemic barriers and inequities to social inclusion in Canadian higher education, Pidgeon (2016) noted that what is needed are equitable approaches to decolonization and intercultural development as part of Indigenization. This involves not only meeting Indigenous peoples where they are (e.g., physically increasing access to digital and in-person learning environments) but also ensuring high-quality programs and services. Incorporating Indigenous perspectives and knowledge can foster healing and reconciliation among Aboriginal peoples and support a transition from historical trauma.

Geographical Isolation

Geographical isolation poses significant challenges for Indigenous students seeking higher education. Walton et al. (2020) indicate that many Indigenous university students are from small reserves in rural locations. They experience not only the transition from high school to university but also often the cultural shock of moving to a city, both of which can affect their post-secondary education experience. "Being away from support networks and cultural ceremonies could negatively affect the persistence of Indigenous students who relocated" (p. 435). Many Indigenous communities are in remote areas, making access to educational institutions difficult. Gore et al. (2017) noted that several studies have identified geographical isolation as a major factor in the challenges that Indigenous students face regarding access to higher education in Australia. As public universities are located within cities, this could restrict students living in rural areas from enrolling in higher education programs. One of the several strategies recommended includes the development of regional centers for Indigenous students. For example, Nicola Valley Institute, an Indigenous public post-secondary institute in British Columbia, is known for its inclusion of Elders in all facets of educational programming and delivery, the hiring of Indigenous instructors, and the use of many traditional practices, such as talking circles, in the pedagogical delivery of programming (Robinson, 2023). Other supports include distance education and technology-driven services, such as online academic advising and tutoring, which can help mitigate challenges associated with geographic isolation (Shankar et al., 2020; Walton et al., 2020; University of Alberta, 2021).

Economic Barriers

Economic factors play a crucial role in the educational attainment of Indigenous students. In a study conducted on factors contributing to or hindering the post-secondary access and success of American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native

Hawaiians in U.S. higher education, Ryes and Shotton (2018) suggested that given the continually escalating costs of college tuition, financial aid can provide an important point of access into higher education. Many Indigenous families face financial hardships that limit their ability to support their children's education. Walton et al. (2020) noted that financial stress was a key obstacle for Indigenous students to complete their university programs. "Housing, childcare, and food were very expensive, and difficulties in paying for this created stress for Indigenous students" (p. 443). Every single female parent in the study reported that they lacked adequate financial support, which was closely linked to the scarcity of affordable housing and childcare. In Western Canada, a study conducted by Shankar, Ip, and Khalema (2020) on the experiences and challenges faced by Indigenous and immigrant learners in post-secondary education found that increasing undergraduate fees, lack of proximity to post-secondary institutions, and financial constraints are major factors that discourage many students from pursuing post-secondary education. As a result, these students tend to face additional barriers when it comes to accessing and completing post-secondary education. It is argued that financial barriers need to be addressed to promote more equitable educational opportunities for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. There is still relatively little research examining the importance of financial aid for Indigenous students.

Gaps in the Literature

In examining the barriers to higher education for Indigenous students, several gaps, contradictions, and limitations emerge across the literature. These areas provide a foundation for future research and highlight the complexities surrounding Indigenous access to post-secondary education.

Contradictions in Existing Studies

One of the prominent contradictions in the literature revolves around the role of culturally responsive curricula. While several studies emphasize the importance of incorporating Indigenous perspectives to address cultural disconnection and improve student engagement (Kanu, 2007; Gore et al., 2017), others argue that curriculum reform alone is insufficient when systemic barriers persist. For example, Pidgeon, Michelle (2016), highlights that although many Canadian universities have introduced Indigenous content and initiatives, these efforts often remain superficial or tokenistic and fail to address deeper institutional racism. As a result, such changes do not necessarily lead to improved student retention or success. This suggests that without broader structural transformation—including institutional accountability and anti-racist practices—curriculum changes alone have limited impact on Indigenous students' educational outcomes. This presents a contradiction where some researchers emphasize cultural content while others stress systemic reform as the key to improving educational outcomes for Indigenous students.

Moreover, while some literature emphasizes the importance of geographical isolation and financial challenges (Kanu, 2007; Walton et al., 2020), other studies argue that cultural and systemic racism presents a more profound barrier (Bailey, 2016; Shankar et al., 2013). This debate suggests that while economic issues are critical, they may be secondary to issues of discrimination and exclusion within academic environments.

Limitations of Current Research

A significant limitation of the current body of research is its regional focus. Many studies are context-specific, particularly focusing on Canada, Australia, and the United States (Clark et al., 2014; Reyes and Shotton, 2018). While these regions have significant Indigenous populations, there is less research on Indigenous students in other parts of the world, such as Asia or Africa. This geographic limitation suggests that more global research is needed to understand how Indigenous populations in diverse contexts experience higher education barriers. Additionally, much of the literature focuses on undergraduate experiences, with limited attention given to graduate students. Another limitation is the lack of longitudinal studies. Most research captures a snapshot of Indigenous students' experiences at a particular point in time (Walton et al., 2020), but fewer studies follow students over extended periods to observe how their challenges evolve and whether institutional interventions are successful over time. This hinders the ability to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of strategies designed to support Indigenous learners.

Future Research Directions and Emerging Trends

An important area for future research is the role of Indigenous-centred institutions, such as dedicated cultural centers or Indigenous colleges. Fredericks, Barney, Bunda, Hausia, Martin, Elston, and Bernardino (2024) emphasized that these centers provide critical support for Indigenous students, promoting connection and belonging. However, more research is needed to determine how these centers can be optimized and whether they can be replicated across diverse educational systems.

An emerging trend to be noted is the increasing discussion around decolonization within academic institutions. Pidgeon (2016) and Milne and Wotherspoon (2023) argued that decolonization efforts must go beyond symbolic gestures to fully integrate Indigenous ways of knowing and learning into university systems. This trend towards decolonization aligns with calls for a more inclusive and equitable academic environment for Indigenous students, challenging existing power structures within academia.

Recommendations and Implications

The recommendations are based on the literature review findings concerning the barriers to higher education for Indigenous students in Canada. These recommendations target educators, policymakers, and researchers to address the systemic, cultural, and economic challenges that hinder Indigenous students' academic success.

Promoting Inclusivity

Educators play a crucial role in fostering an inclusive environment for Indigenous students. According to the Indigenous Student Success Survey report by the University of Alberta (2021), the two main factors contributing to student success are having a community of support (34.5%) and having good quality (i.e., approachable, respectful, and compassionate) professors, supervisors, and mentors (31.5%). The study by Walton et al. (2020) showed that most Indigenous students (97%) recommended having more Indigenous faculty and Indigenous cultural events (73%) at the university. Many students stated that the Indigenous staff at the Indigenous gathering place assisted them in building relationships with faculty and students and supported cultural activities. For example, students reported that organizing activities such as a powwow and weekly soup lunches would facilitate meeting other Indigenous students, faculty, and staff. Throughout the several interviews conducted in the study, it was evident that fostering a sense of family or teamwork with both students and faculty was key support for Indigenous students. Gaudry and Lorenz (2018) suggested, "With a greater number of Indigenous scholars and the promotion of those scholars to positions of administrative authority, the larger systemic work is more likely to get done" (p. 221). Hence, it is recommended to promote Indigenous faculty into administrative positions, which would result in more substantive structural change.

In a study conducted on the significance of Indigenous centres/units across Australia, Fredericks et al. (2024) indicated that the presence of an Indigenous centre/unit on campus was essential for university completion, as discussed by graduates. This will certainly create more culturally safe environments for Indigenous students, both in classrooms and throughout all educational facilities. For example, the University of Alberta, which is home to a diverse and welcoming community of over 1,300 Indigenous students nationwide, has many support services such as First People's House, providing access to Elders, Auntie's Check-In, financial resources, tutoring, etc. According to the Indigenous Student Success Survey report (2021), almost all the students who accessed support services through First Peoples' House were satisfied with the services (70.5% very satisfied; 25.2% moderately satisfied). Another example is Thompson Rivers University's 'The Coyote Project,' which has made the campus a welcoming place for all, especially Indigenous students and staff.

Additionally, institutions should conduct workshops to address racism and microaggressions, educating staff and non-Aboriginal students on the impacts of discrimination on Indigenous students' well-being and success (Clark et al., 2014). As a healthy student-teacher relationship is significant for a student's success, it is very important to ensure that educators are properly trained to handle Indigenous issues. The need for a public awareness campaign is also considered fundamental. Canel-Çınarbaş and Yohani (2018) suggested, "A public awareness campaign not only would help to bring consciousness to these often-unconscious acts of discrimination but could facilitate the creation of safety for victims and potential victims" (p. 56). Safe spaces in universities encourage victims to make use of the available supports and mechanisms to address human rights abuses they experience.

Policy Recommendations

Policymakers must prioritize financial and institutional support structures to create an equitable environment for Indigenous students. One key recommendation is increasing access to targeted financial aid for Indigenous students facing economic hardships, as economic barriers are a significant hindrance to enrollment and persistence (Ryes et al., 2018). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada recognized the need for permanent funding that would support community-controlled education and relationship-building projects (TRC, 2015). Establishing designated funds for tuition assistance, housing, and childcare would alleviate some financial strain on Indigenous students and reduce dropout rates (Shankar et al., 2020). Moreover, funding should be directed toward establishing Indigenous support centers on university campuses, as these spaces provide essential cultural and social support, reducing feelings of isolation and enhancing students' sense of community (Fredericks et al., 2024). For example, an Indigenous centre established by a university in Western Canada provided support with registration, housing, and tutoring and also organized Indigenous social and cultural events, and the Indigenous support staff were recognized in all student interviews for their effective role in supporting Indigenous students (Walton et al., 2020). According to Gallop and Bastien (2016), institutions that possess an Aboriginal student centre focused on promoting culture-specific activities and resources often produce outcomes that can lead to higher levels of Aboriginal student academic and social engagement. However, Uink, Bennett, Hill, van den Berg, and Rolfe (2022) noted, “not all Indigenous students are aware of, or choose to, access Indigenous-specific assistance or Indigenous centres/units” (p. 1). Therefore, it is very important to ensure that all Indigenous students have access to these Indigenous centres/units.

Potential Barriers to Implementation

Implementing these recommendations may encounter barriers, including financial limitations, as universities may lack sufficient funding to establish Indigenous centers or provide comprehensive financial aid. According to Pidgeon (2016), Aboriginal students shared experiences of how limited operating budgets impacted services (e.g., limited access to tutoring, computer resources, etc.). Also, the effectiveness of Indigenous-centred institutions and cultural centers is a significant barrier. Fredericks et al. (2024) noted the importance of these centers, yet there is limited research on how they impact student retention and success. Additionally, cultural resistance may pose challenges; faculty and staff may be unaccustomed to or resistant to incorporating Indigenous perspectives or addressing systemic biases within their institutions. Bailey (2016) noted that it may be important for future researchers and policymakers to examine how professors at the university level are ‘trained’ in terms of sensitivity to/awareness of Indigenous issues and the proper manner for responding to controversial situations.

It is essential to acknowledge how various social and intellectual locations may frame these proposed interventions. From a fiscal policy standpoint, the high cost of maintaining regional centers in remote areas is often cited as a barrier, though this location frequently overlooks the long-term economic return of increasing Indigenous graduation rates as a vital national imperative. Intellectually, the academy often operates on a 'universalist' paradigm that inadvertently silences the relationality and community-based knowledge sharing central to Indigenous worldviews. By addressing these competing perspectives, our call for decolonization moves beyond a symbolic gesture to a structural necessity that directly challenges existing academic power structures.

Conclusion

Indigenous students in Canada face substantial barriers to accessing and completing higher education, rooted in systemic racism, cultural disconnection, historical trauma, geographic isolation, and economic hardship. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive institutional response, including anti-racism initiatives, increased awareness of microaggressions, integration of Indigenous perspectives into curricula, and the development of culturally safe spaces and Indigenous support centres to strengthen belonging and engagement. Decolonization efforts, alongside expanded access to distance education, improved financial aid, and affordable housing, are also essential to mitigating structural inequities, particularly for students in rural and remote communities. However, it is also important to recognize competing social and political perspectives shaping these interventions. Fiscal concerns are often raised regarding the cost of establishing and maintaining regional or remote support services, while meritocratic critiques question whether targeted funding and equity-based initiatives align with principles of equal opportunity. While these perspectives reflect legitimate policy debates, they must be critically situated within the historical and structural realities of Indigenous educational inequities, as failing to do

so risks reinforcing rather than addressing existing disparities. Ultimately, advancing equity in higher education requires sustained institutional reform, meaningful engagement with Indigenous communities, and a critical awareness of the broader sociopolitical contexts in which these policies are enacted.

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