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Just Transitions from the Bottom-Up

Case study: Tkaronto, Kaniatarí:io, A'no:wara Tsi Kawè:note (Toronto, Ontario, Turtle Island/Canada)

Waterloo Climate Institute Technical Brief

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Key messages

- Higher education is a just transitions site. The issue is not only whether Indigenous knowledge is included, but who holds authority, how labour is valued, and whether institutions can be reorganized around Indigenous responsibilities.
- Inclusion can function as a technology of institutional management: it makes Indigenous presence visible without necessarily shifting decision-making structures, workloads, or accountability.
- Indigenous-led design, accessibility, and land-based protocol must be planned together from the outset rather than treated as competing afterthoughts.
- Recognition and redistribution matter, but reparative just transitions in education also require resurgence and settler responsibilities.

Why this case matters

Toronto is often described as progressive, diverse, and committed to sustainability and reconciliation. Those descriptions matter, but they do not tell us whether institutions are willing to shift authority, labour, and accountability. This case argues that higher education itself is a just transitions site. The question is not whether Indigenous presence can be included inside existing post-secondary structures, but whether those structures can be reorganized around Indigenous governance, community accountability, and relationships to land.

The Toronto case is grounded in the Indigenous Curriculum Specialists' Network (ICSN), a national network of Indigenous curriculum specialists working across post-secondary institutions in Canada. ICSN exists because institutions often affirm decolonization, Indigenization, and reconciliation rhetorically while under-resourcing the people expected to enact those same mandates. The network offers peer support, collective analysis,

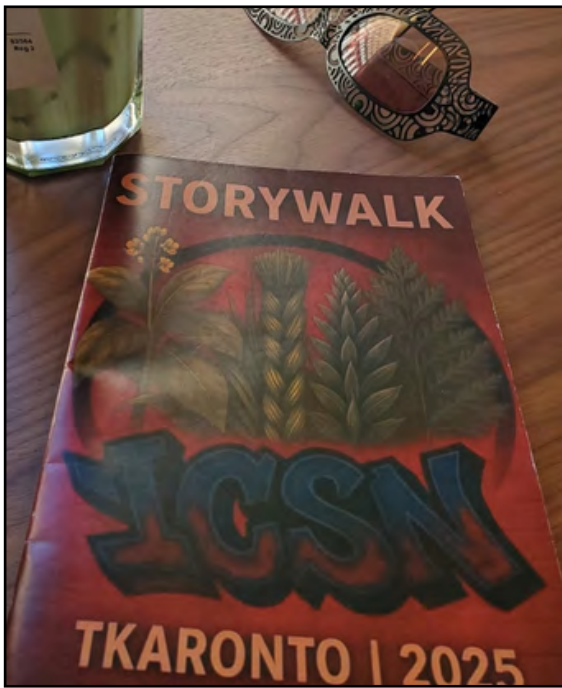
and a counterweight to the isolation of lone positions charged with carrying structural change. The Māwandòsewin: Gathering of the ICSN - Report of Recommendations for Post-Secondary Institutions in Canada (2023) is a peer-led set of recommendations that focus on Indigenous governance, community-centred hiring, internal accountability, and decolonizing time in the academy, all of which make Toronto directly relevant to policy audiences concerned with just transition design (Tamtik 2025).

Like the risk frameworks challenged in Bogotá, institutional transitions in Toronto can either reproduce dominant arrangements or become a site where communities reshape the terms of change from below. Recent reparative just transition scholarship sharpens this claim. Bowness et al. (2025) argue that redistribution alone is insufficient and propose a “5R framework” - recognition, representation, redistribution, resurgence, and (settler) responsibility. Toronto shows what those last two terms require in practice. Seen this way, Toronto is not only an urban location. It is a test of whether institutional change will remain managerial and symbolic, or become materially accountable to Indigenous peoples.

Territory of struggle

Toronto is built over Indigenous lands, shorelines, and waterways that continue to shape life in the city despite ongoing colonial erasure. The shoreline of Lake Ontario and the wider Great Lakes watershed sustain the city materially, even as finance, real-estate development, transit, and university expansion often render those relations background. The issue is not simply exclusion. It is the selective organization of value, authority, and livability within an urban order that depends on Indigenous land while obscuring Indigenous jurisdiction and responsibility.





The ICSN and Just Transitions gathering made those layers harder to ignore. A “StoryWalk” moved from the lakeshore through public art, underpasses, and downtown corporate space



while Indigenous participants left the downtown shore to Ward’s Island for circle, protocol and support. Across the gathering, heat and poor air quality made the climate crisis physically embodied rather than abstract. Many ICSN participants also arrived carrying institutional precarity or exhaustion. Toronto, therefore, contributed not only as a site of institutional struggle, but as a place where shifts became possible through protocol, discomfort, relation, and Indigenous-led practice.

What mattered was not only where people gathered, but whether territory was treated as a living relation capable of reorganizing the terms of encounter. The central question became whether land, protocol, and Indigenous pedagogies could shape the gathering in an urban metropolis - and by extension institutional life - or whether they would remain secondary to bureaucracy, managerial tempos, and symbolic commitments (Daley et al. 2024; Simpson 2014; Tamtik 2025).



The dominant story this case challenges

Toronto's dominant story is not that Indigenous presence is absent. It is that Indigenous presence is often welcomed when it can be framed, managed, and made legible without shifting institutional authority. Inclusion, in this sense, can function as a technology of institutional management: it displays commitment while preserving the structures that organize decision-making, labour, and accountability.

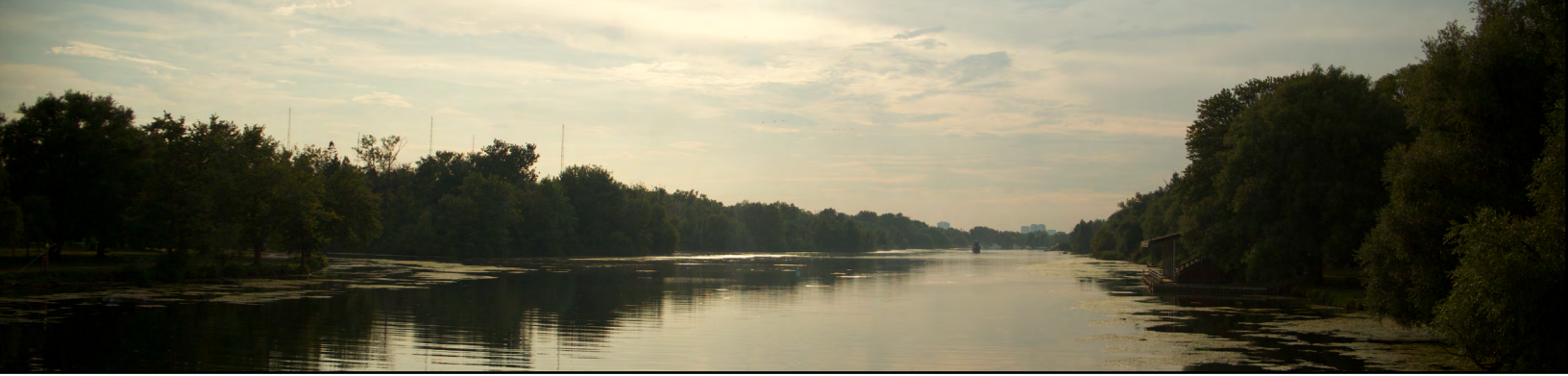
The StoryWalk through the Toronto Dominion Gallery of Indigenous Art crystallized this problem. The question was not whether Indigenous art was present, but who controlled the “frame” and the story the setting told about itself. The question of a TD branded green frame on the Inuit art collection travels beyond the precincts of the art collection world. Universities also frequently welcome Indigenous knowledge as content, consultation, or evidence of progress, while leaving decision-making structures, workloads, and hiring models largely intact (Pidgeon 2016).

The Māwāndōsewin report pushes directly against this pattern. It treats Indigenous curriculum work as relational, collective, and community-accountable, not as a



checklist or single hire. In practice, this means more than increasing visibility. It means Indigenous self-governance in institutional processes, quality-assurance systems that answer to Indigenous priorities as laid out in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, and staffing models that do not isolate people in lone positions asked to carry structural change on behalf of the institution (Jimmy et al. 2019). Daley et al. (2024) make a similar point: relational curriculum work can matter deeply, but without

structural change it is vulnerable to institutionalization without transformation.

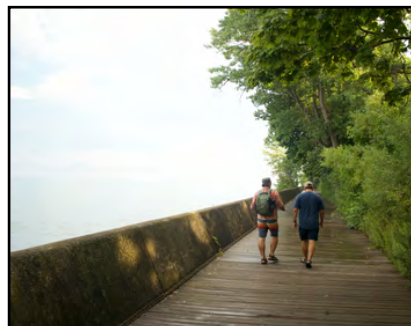
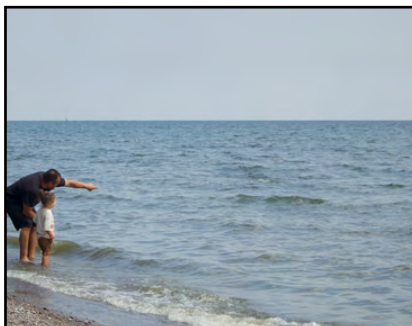


Life, land, and water teachers

In Toronto, land was never a backdrop. Water, heat, shorelines, and intergenerational presence taught throughout the gathering. Beginning with the lake and crossing to Ward's Island shifted attention away from Toronto's skyline self-image and toward the living systems that sustain it (Simpson 2014). The island did not erase contradictions or provide a simple refuge. It changed the conditions of attention: circle, offerings, conversation, and listening unfolded differently when the lake - not the downtown core - became the relational centre.

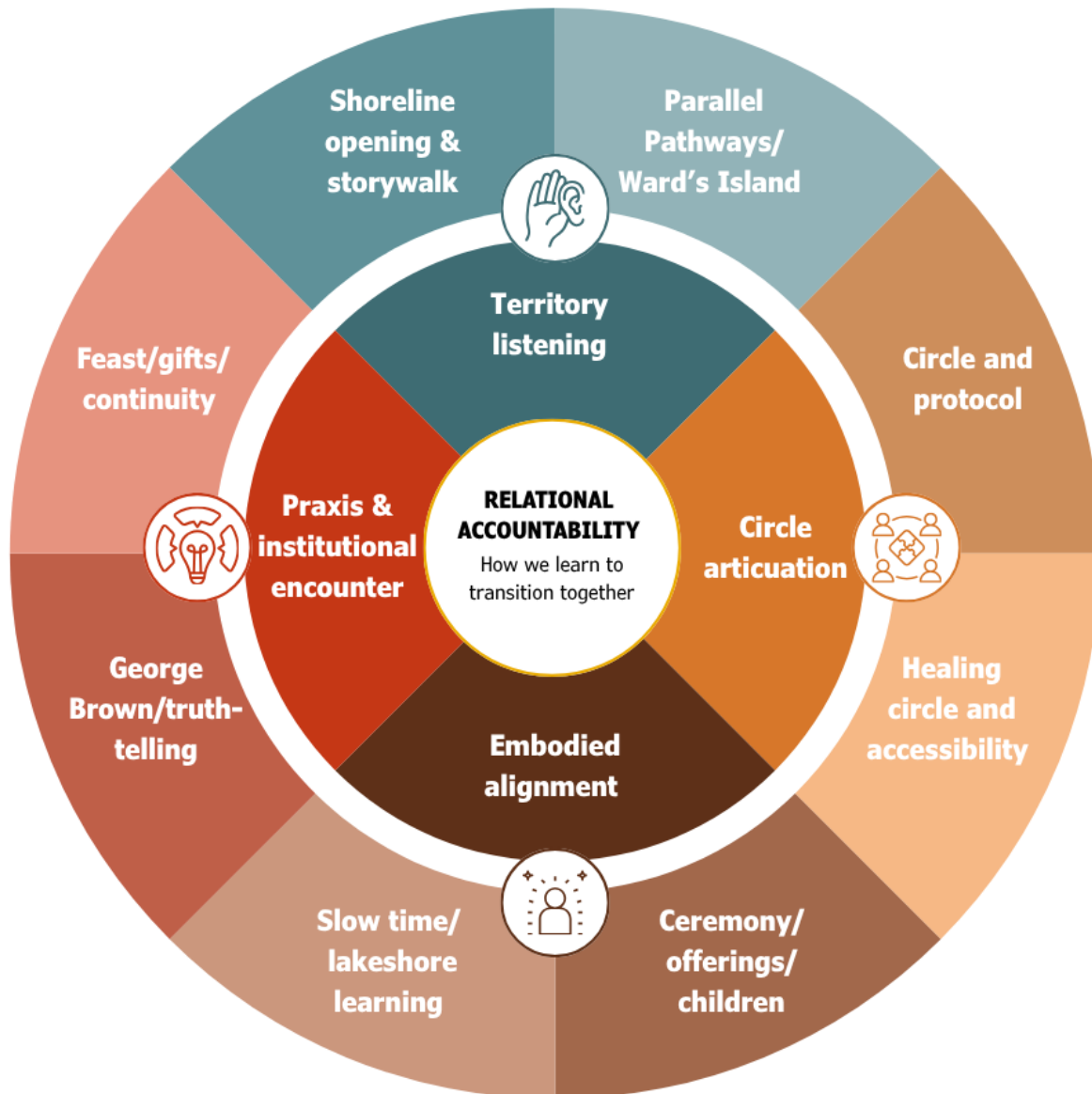


Heat and poor air quality were also teachers. They reminded participants that learning is embodied, and that the climate crisis enters pedagogy through fatigue, mobility, accessibility, and choices about how to gather. Children, family members, shared meals, and unstructured time also taught that relationship-building is not peripheral to this work. It is part of the infrastructure of accountable learning.



Methods-in-use

Graphic 1. Relational Accountability: How we learn to transition together.



Toronto put the project's broader method into practice through four overlapping movements: territory listening, circle articulations, embodied alignment, and praxis. Territory listening began through parallel pathways: a mainland StoryWalk for non-Indigenous participants and an Indigenous-led island gathering grounded in circle sharing, protocol, and support. Circle articulations took shape when both groups



came together the next day on the island to surface joys, pressures, and contradictions in their experiences, including institutional precarity and different understandings of responsible hosting. Embodied alignment emerged through walking, offerings, ceremony, shared meals, children's presence, a give-away, and extended time by the water. Praxis came into view when the gathering entered a post-secondary space and brought Indigenous educators, Just Transitions travellers, and institutional

actors into the same circle to speak plainly about accountability, metrics, institutional limits, and the ongoing struggle over Indigenous knowledges (Archibald 2008; Kovach 2009; Wilson 2008).

The larger lesson is that institutional transition is not achieved through policy language alone. It is built through redesigned relations of protocol, labour, care, and accountability.

Contradictions and tensions

One of the clearest lessons emerged through conflict. During the heatwave, some participants requested air-conditioned and hybrid options. Those holding the island space understood the gathering as land-based and ceremonially grounded in ways that could not simply be transferred elsewhere. This should not be read either as evidence that the process failed or as a finished issue that has been fully resolved. It shows that accessibility, disability ethics, care, sovereignty, and protocol must be worked through together in real time.

The healing circle held on the mainland for those who stayed back became important not because it erased disagreement, but because it surfaced it and offered a form of response without denying the difficulty of harmonizing the positions. For policy audiences, the takeaway is concrete: institutions cannot plan accessibility in one silo, land relations in another, and Indigenous governance somewhere else, then assume that institutional framings of accessibility will balance the disagreement. Just transition design requires structures capable of holding difference, repair, and accountability without collapsing into silence, shame, or other forms of lateral violence within Indigenous relations.

Solidarity practices

Toronto brought another layer of solidarity practice to the surface within the broader project. First, it showed why Indigenous design matters. When Indigenous communities shape the pace, sequence, and terms of gathering from the outset, the work is qualitatively different from projects where Indigenous knowledge is added after other priorities are already set. Second, Toronto shows that team-based support is not a luxury. ICSN exists because lone curriculum positions are structurally unsustainable, and because those carrying this work need collective infrastructure, not heroic individualization.

A powerful expression throughout the gathering came when Phoenix participant, DJ Portugal, invoked Abya Yala and the Eagle and Condor prophecy as a reminder that healing moves across north and south, reconnecting peoples, trade routes, and responsibilities that colonization works to sever. That framing resonated strongly in Toronto because it named intercontinental learning rather than symbolic unity: territorial defense in Bogotá, Indigenous education labour in Toronto, and migrant and environmental justice organizing in Phoenix each carry strength by sharing methods of listening, hosting, ceremony, and collective struggle.

Toronto also showed that unstructured relational time is not inefficient. Trust formed while walking, eating, resting, translating, and sitting by the water. These moments are routinely devalued because they do not fit managerial metrics, yet they are part of what makes accountable learning and collaboration possible (ICSN 2023).

Click to watch Sara Mai's sharing about the structural and systemic dimensions of colonialism and the parallels she sees with stories from Bogotá.





Policy implications

For higher-education leaders, funders, and policy committees, the Toronto case offers several direct implications. Indigenous-led design must shape processes from the outset rather than being added after institutional priorities are already set. Team-based support for Indigenous curriculum and an education council for governance work must be treated as core infrastructure, not discretionary enhancement. Accessibility planning, care, and land-based protocol must be developed together rather than treated as separate administrative questions.

More fundamentally, recognition, representation, and redistribution - while necessary - are not enough. A reparative just transition in higher education also requires resurgence and settler responsibility. That means shifting decision-making authority, changing who sets evaluation criteria, and removing barriers that block Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and doing (Bowness et al. 2025). A transition built on institutional half-measures - celebrating inclusion while preserving control - cannot deliver the change it promises.

This is where Toronto connects strongly to the broader Indigenous just transition scholarship. For example, Rioux-Gobeil and Thomassin (2024) argue that justice frameworks for Indigenous peoples need to move beyond distributive, procedural, and recognition justice alone and pay closer attention to knowledge renewal and procedural power. Jones et al. (2024) similarly argue that climate policy analysis must ask whether policy disrupts colonial relations rather than merely optimizing justice when it's convenient for those in leadership positions within existing systems. Toronto makes these claims tangible inside higher education. The question is not only whether universities and colleges welcome Indigenous content, but whether Indigenous pedagogies, land relations, and community authority can reorganize institutional priorities, working conditions, and accountability structures.

Conclusion: what scales, and what must stay local

What travels from Toronto is not a single model of Indigenous relationality. What scales are the enabling conditions: Indigenous-led design, team-based support, expanded support networks, time for relation, meaningful accessibility planning, community accountability, and spaces able to hold conflict without breaking relationships. What must stay local are the protocols, teachings, territorial obligations, and community authorities that arise from specific nations and relationships to place.

For higher-education leaders, policy makers, and funders, the practical implication is straightforward. If just transitions are to mean more than climate branding, EDI-I rhetoric, or symbolic reconciliation, institutions must shift resources and authority toward the communities already carrying transition work. A just transition cannot be built on a foundation of half-truths - where institutions retain the power to define the problem, set the pace of change, and limit the terms of response while communities bear the burden of adaptation. Toronto shows that transition in higher education is not only about new policies. It is about new relations of responsibility and new material arrangements that allow Indigenous life, knowledge, and governance to shape the institution rather than decorate it.



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