

RESEARCH FEATURE: DEVELOPING AND DELIVERING A CULTURALLY RELEVANT INTERNATIONAL WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING EXCHANGE FOR INDIGENOUS STUDENTS

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Decolonization and Indigenization are increasingly important topics in post-secondary education (at universities and colleges). This paper evaluates an international Indigenous work-integrated learning (WIL)¹ exchange between University of Victoria in British Columbia, Canada and three Australian Universities. Researchers conducted interviews with participants and found the program aligned with the core themes of a culturally-relevant experience. The research outlines important implications for WIL practitioners and educators for the future of Indigenous WIL.

WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research is about reframing WIL programs for Indigenous students. Decolonization and Indigenization are important considerations in post-secondary education. The researchers argue that we should recognize our own bias in theory and research. The researchers emphasize the importance of Indigenous knowledge that is free from colonial and imperial influences. The paper builds on earlier work that identifies successful culturally-relevant Indigenous education and emphasizes programming that fits the needs of the student.

The paper provides some background on the LE,NONET program at the University of Victoria (UVic) in British Columbia, Canada. This program offers services and programs to Indigenous students, including bursaries, leadership and mentorship programs, and academic programs including experiential learning opportunities. This work was the result of a [4-year research project](#) funded by the Canadian Millennial Scholarship Fund.

The LE,NONET project identified six key principles for programs and services supporting Indigenous students: reciprocal learning, supporting Indigenous identity development, culturally-relevant programming, community building, relationship building, and individualized programming.

Building upon these principles and the LE,NONET program, and in collaboration with UVic's Co-operative Education Program and Career Services, an international Indigenous WIL program was introduced. Indigenous students at UVic participated in a WIL term at one of three partner institutions in Australia. Students from the partner institutions in Australia completed an academic term and a community internship at UVic.

¹ **Work-integrated learning (WIL):**

an education model that combines academic studies with a workplace or practice setting. Work-integrated learning includes a partnership of an academic institution, a host organization, and a student.

WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT? CONTINUED

Students completed pre-departure courses that included things like intercultural competency training and other Indigenous-focused material. Students were supported by UVic and partner staff during their experience and referenced a competency framework (that includes things like personal management, research analysis, etc.) to develop their skills.

The researchers wanted to examine this unique program that combines WIL, internationalization, decolonization, and Indigenization to determine the effectiveness in meeting the students' needs and the implications for the future of Indigenous WIL.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS DO?

The researchers conducted interviews with 11 out of 15 students who participated in the international exchange program between 2016 and 2020. The researchers conducted this process with a focus on Indigenous cultural process, including Indigenous ways of knowing/learning. The researchers collected qualitative information through one-on-one interviews following the Indigenous protocol of offering a gift in exchange for sharing time and knowledge. The interview questions explored how the students benefitted from the program, what they learned and its impact, and what challenges they faced.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS FIND?

The researchers used the LE, NONET six key principles as a framework to analyze the interview data and the success of the program. The findings were consistent with the six principles and offered insights to the students' experiences, summarized in the table below.

RECIPROCAL LEARNING	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The students identified sharing knowledge as a shared value with the Indigenous people in both countries, and felt this was important• Students conducted workshops and presentations to share cultural knowledge• One student noted the teaching from an Elder that if you take care of the land, the land takes care of you, as an example that highlights the importance of this two-way knowledge sharing
SUPPORTING INDIGENOUS IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students reported feeling stronger as an Indigenous person on the exchange through cultivating and sharing their own cultural teachings. This includes strengthening their relationship and engagement with the land, plants, and animals• Students deepened their knowledge of similarities and differences of Indigenous cultures in Canada and Australia
CULTURALLY RELEVANT PROGRAMMING	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students took courses prior to departure that included things like colonial history and conducting work in Indigenous communities in a respectful manner• Welcoming ceremonies for students were conducted, and engagement with the land was encouraged through visits to culturally important sites with Elders, emphasizing the importance of the Indigenous relationship to the people and the land

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS FIND? CONTINUED

COMMUNITY BUILDING	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students noted a variety of community building opportunities including having mentors and interacting with Elders, faculty, colleagues, and peers• Most importantly, students reported the importance of off-campus community building with visits to Indigenous communities, including participating in social circles and shared home meals
RELATIONSHIP BUILDING	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students reported building lifelong relationships and noted similarities between cultures and colonial histories with the communities• Mental health was improved through spending time with Elders and developing friendships, and through receiving the gift of cultural teachings• Building and maintaining a relationship with the previous exchange student was noted as an important factor in relationship building
INDIVIDUALIZED PROGRAMMING	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students were empowered to be self-directed during their experience and determine their own learning outcomes• Students completed a wide variety of work term projects spanning disciplines• Students were required to complete a community engagement activity, presenting on Indigenous cultures and issues, with a focus on sharing knowledge through art, dance, and storytelling

The researchers also found that the experience contributed to the students' motivation and confidence to succeed in intercultural interactions. It also enhanced their understanding of the similarities and differences between cultures and their ability to plan for and adapt in diverse cultural contexts.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

Educators and work-integrated learning practitioners can use this research to think differently about decolonization and Indigenization challenges, and to reflect on what contributes to a culturally-relevant Indigenous WIL program. This research can also help to re-define success for Indigenous WIL beyond labour market participation, including the impact on the students' self-determination and community building.

KEYWORDS

Indigenous WIL, decolonization, Indigenization, student mobility, cultural intelligence, culturally-relevant WIL

CITATION

Ramji, K., Kines, L., Hancock, R., & McRae, N. (2021) Developing and delivering a culturally relevant international work-integrated learning exchange for Indigenous students. *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning*, 22(3), 307-321.

This summary features researchers from multiple institutions across Canada.

The Work-Learn Institute at the University of Waterloo is the only institute in the world dedicated to research on co-operative education and other forms of work-integrated learning.