

**Indigenizing the 20 questions:  
Considering the future of Aboriginal higher education  
in BC's post-secondary system**

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**CUFA BC's 20 Questions for 2020 Project**

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## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to add a perspective of Indigenous higher education that cuts across and expands Bowles' (2009) *20 Questions for 2020*. The paper first provides a picture of the changing faces of our Aboriginal student population. I rely on recent research to propose what institutions, governments (provincial, federal, and Aboriginal), and Aboriginal communities can do to further Aboriginal education across the life span.

My approach is informed by the work of Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) who gifted post-secondary institutions the guide of the 4Rs (*respect* for First Nations' cultural integrity, *relevance* to First Nations perspectives and experiences, *reciprocal* relationships, and *responsibility* through participation). Rather than focusing on the deficits of Aboriginal students, the 4Rs articulated an alternative perspective that challenged institutions to examine their role and responsibilities for Aboriginal higher education. In addition to the 4Rs, I use a wholistic<sup>1</sup> framework that takes into account the interconnections between the physical, emotional, intellectual, and cultural realms of the individual and the inter-relationships of the individual to family, community, and nation (see Pidgeon, 2008 for more information ). The 4Rs and a wholistic framework, as Marker (2004) argues, is particularly pertinent today due to the changes facing the province and nation as we all engage in critical reflection of our past and our desires for the future.

## Who are our Aboriginal students?

One in ten students in the British Columbia K-12 system are Aboriginal, First Nations, Métis, or Inuit. Given the diversity of nations within this province, each institution should consider not only the local community but also the broader provincial context when thinking about who their Aboriginal students are. Although it may be obvious to many, it is worth reminding our selves that Aboriginal peoples are not homogenous—each nation has its own cultural and linguistic practices that make them unique. Seeing all Aboriginal peoples as the same, a practice stemming from colonization and assimilation policies, has contributed to an educational agenda that often does not meet the needs of Aboriginal learners.

Today, many of our Aboriginal postsecondary students are older than average, often enter university through the articulated college-transfer system, are predominantly female, and may have dependents. With more Aboriginal students completing high school, more are choosing to enter post-secondary institutions (Ministry of Education, 2009). Thus, a growing Aboriginal presence on our university campuses is the high-school direct-entry student. However, there are also gender differences, in that typically, fewer Aboriginal

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<sup>1</sup> I am purposefully spelling wholistic with a "w" to represent the interconnections and inter-related connections of Indigeneity (see also Archibald et al., 1995)

males pursue university education compared to their female peers. These two trends must become part of our collective consciousness as post-secondary institutions continue to compete for enrollments. I argue that focusing on the fastest growing population in Canada- our Indigenous peoples -- should be a key part of our recruitment and retention agendas. Understanding who our Aboriginal students are is essential to improving Aboriginal higher education in British Columbia.

The next section of this paper indigenizes Bowles' 20 questions within the framework of the 4Rs.

### Indigenizing the 20 questions<sup>2</sup> :

Educational systems across Canada have a special relationship to Aboriginal peoples due to the historical legacy of colonization and assimilation (e.g., residential schools).

Acknowledging this history is critical as we move forward and build new relationships between education sectors and Aboriginal peoples. The power of education to transform and decolonize is not lost on those working in the field. By acknowledging my responsibility as someone located within a position of social power I attempt to provide some touch points for reinvigorating, and boldly pushing forward our conversations with the goal of meaningful action across the province. Therefore, this conversation is not limited to just the research universities, but more broadly, encourages all of us involved in education—whether early childhood education to post-graduate studies to consider how our institutions, programs, services, policies, and practices are addressing larger societal issues (e.g., poverty, ill-health, low socio-economic status and others) that particularly impact the quality of life of Aboriginal peoples.

#### *Respect*

*Respect for Indigenous cultural integrity* speaks to issues of wholism and Indigenous epistemology, ontology, and axiology. It includes all aspects of the institution including academic programming, curriculum, student services, along with institutional policies and practices that respect who Aboriginal peoples are as diverse nations and honors what each Aboriginal person (whether administrator, faculty, staff, or student) brings to the institution (Pidgeon, 2008).

(Question 1) *What explains BC's Aboriginal peoples' historically low participation rate? How can their participation rates be increased?*

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<sup>2</sup> I must be clear and state that it is not my intention to be exclusionary of other perspectives; it is my intention to add an Indigenous perspective to the discussion. I also acknowledge of the work of all those Indigenous peoples and allies who have gone before to create the current space in the post-secondary educational system that allows me to have this discussion. I want to raise my hands to those working in mainstream and Indigenous institutions in this province who continue to strive for excellence for Aboriginal education and continue to honor the 4Rs and Indigenous cultural integrity.

The pathways to post-secondary education, particularly university, are not linear. Often Aboriginal applicants do not have the high school credentials required for direct entry into university. Many Aboriginal students in fact choose college first and then (maybe) transfer to university. Statistics Canada (2003a, 2003b) highlights the gender differences in PSE attainment, where most trade or college diploma credentials are received by Aboriginal males; more Aboriginal females have a university degree. Higher than normal dropout rates in early grades (e.g., grade 6 compared to grade 8) also influence post-secondary pathways.

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996), commonly referred to as RCAP, identified several factors that impede student success in post-secondary institutions. Some of these issues relate to the K-12 sector not adequately preparing Aboriginal students academically for university (e.g., students do not complete the necessary high school credits required to enter university). Other issues related to the lack of culturally relevant programs and support services provided by the institution, and the continued prevalence of systemic acts of discrimination and racism in the classroom and in institutional policies. More recent research shows that issues of racism and support services continue today (Archibald, Pidgeon, & Hawkey, 2009; Kuokkanen, 2007; Pidgeon, 2008).

Of course, funding remains a constant issue for many Aboriginal students (and others) as increasing tuition fees and living costs are not sufficiently supported by programs like the Aboriginal Post-secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP) and the University College Entrance Program offered by the Federal government for First Nations students (e.g., those recognized under the Indian Act) (RCAP, 1996). The funding caps of the late 1990s on PSSSP created long wait lists and students seeking out other forms of funding to supplement their educational journeys. Funding issues are also explored under *Relevance*.

*(Question 13) What governance structures (including Aboriginal governance models) might universities learn from to offer high quality educational programs and advance frontiers of Indigenous knowledge?*

Governance structures that encourage and permit meaningful consultation are needed; such structures require the redistribution of power. There may also be lessons learned from Indigenous forms of governance that institutions may benefit learning from. Simply layering Indigeneity on-top of current governance structures is inadequate and disrespectful of the Indigenous process.

*(Question 15) How should Indigenous knowledge and academic freedom be protected in the contemporary university?*

The relationship between Indigenous knowledges and academic freedom is an ongoing conversation and process. Part of this dialogue relates to issues of intellectual property (Question 12), which is discussed later in this paper. Respect for the diversity of Indigenous

knowledges inherently connects to cultural integrity of each Aboriginal peoples. Cultural integrity, as described by Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) and Tierney and Jun (2001), refers to the cultural capital that is inherent in each Indigenous culture. It is conceptualizing each individual within the wholistic framework and how that relates to who they are as Indigenous peoples. Cultural integrity values who each Aboriginal student is, what they are bringing to the institution, honoring their cultural traditions, values, languages, and practices. Respecting what knowledges and understandings that Aboriginal peoples, whether students, faculty, staff and/or Elders, bring to the institution is key to this process (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991).

#### *Relevance*

*Relevance* takes into account First Nations perspectives and experiences (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991).

*(Question 2) In considering a learning environment designed to maximize success based on Indigenous epistemology, ontology, and axiology, what support mechanisms need to be in place for faculty and students?*

The wholistic framework coupled with the 4Rs provides insight into an examination of the learning environment of BC's research universities. Each component of the framework (e.g. physical, emotional, intellectual, and cultural needs interconnected with the interrelationships of individual, family, and nation) provides a lens from which to identify where and how Indigenous knowledges are present. In terms of the physical realm- Is Indigenous knowledge present physically in these spaces- the classroom, the curriculum, and the broader institution? Culturally- what is present at the institution? Does it have a physical space that welcomes Aboriginal students? Are there policies in place that discuss cultural ceremony and protocol? Intellectually where is Aboriginal content in courses and programs? How can the institutional community improve recruitment and retention of Aboriginal students in under-represented programs (e.g., sciences). Emotionally, how do institutions support the emotional well being of Aboriginal students?

*(Question 3) How do Aboriginal participation rates vary by region? To what extent does the availability of a university or other institution locally reduce differences? What challenges face multi-campus research universities?*

The Research Universities Council of British Columbia (TRUCBC), formally The Presidents' University Council (TUPC), *Baccalaureate Graduates Survey (BGS)* was analyzed by Pidgeon (2008) to identify Aboriginal undergraduate alumni. This analysis showed that typically, higher Aboriginal enrollments occurred in areas with higher proportions of First Nations and Métis peoples. Based on this data, enrollment trends for First Nations are associated with population demographics and geographical location. However, this analysis also brought attention to the need for improved systems of data collection that connects the K-

12, college, and universities across the province so a clear understanding of what is happening institutionally, between institutions, and regions in terms of recruitment and retention. The missing data piece to this puzzle are the out-of-province or country Indigenous students who attend post-secondary institutions in British Columbia.

Understanding the relationship between institutional proximity to Aboriginal communities (whether in BC or beyond) and Aboriginal student recruitment and retention is key as many Aboriginal peoples choose to pursue their post-secondary education close to home, particularly when they come from smaller rural communities. The question then for the larger research universities is how can their campuses become places in which Aboriginal students can see themselves. This trajectory of attending local colleges and regional universities connects back to the responsibilities of all post-secondary institutions in the province to the Aboriginal communities and territories on which the campuses reside.

*(Question 7) How can institutions develop optimal policies to attract Aboriginal students, increasing accessibility and maintain adequate funding levels for research universities?*

Financing options must be clear and processes streamlined. Institutions are making progress in developing policies that assist with third party billing. Within institutions, and perhaps more broadly, education about Aboriginal financial issues is needed. For example, it is important to know that most Aboriginal students are not fully-funded for their education, so the perception that Aboriginal students receive a "free ride" is false and causes misunderstanding and discrimination within the institution. Education is also needed regarding the diverse financial options available to students, such as scholarships, bursaries, student loans, part-time work, co-op placements, undergraduate research/academic assistantships, along with provincial, federal, and Aboriginal nation funding initiatives.

*(Question 8) What funding framework would provide research universities with adequate and predictable operating grants to support Indigenous growth and development across the institution?*

Pidgeon (2008) found that institutional funding that is part of the core operating budget communicates institutional commitment to Aboriginal education (i.e., programs, services, scholarships, and staff positions). First Nations initiatives have historically been based on short-term, limited, and/or soft-funds. While such initiatives have created stimulus and short-term programs and services, limited funding does not provide security to grow, develop, and/or enhance currently successful initiatives.

*(Question 9) How should BC fund Aboriginal graduate student spaces and recruit and retain the best and brightest Aboriginal graduate students?*

SAGE (Supporting Aboriginal Graduate Enhancement) has existed in this province since 2004<sup>3</sup>. This cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional culturally relevant, peer-faculty mentoring program has the goal of supporting Aboriginal graduate students through to the successful completion of their doctorates. This program exists in four regional pods (Vancouver, Victoria, Kelowna, and Prince George). This program enhances peer and faculty support for Aboriginal graduate students at the magisterial and doctoral levels but it does not take on institutional-specific roles and responsibilities for recruitment and retention of Aboriginal students.

SAGE has recently been evaluated as part of a larger research project exploring Aboriginal transitions from undergraduate to graduate school (AT:U2G). Archibald, Pidgeon, and Hawkey (2009) found that Aboriginal graduate students benefit from the relationships they make with fellow Aboriginal students across the province. The SAGE program provides added value to their graduate experiences as many of them found a space that was culturally relevant, respected their cultural integrity, and built relationships with peers and Aboriginal faculty whom they may have not met previously. SAGE also supports these students' academic goals by providing discussions around culturally relevant theories and methodologies, along with practical dialogue that allows them to share issues or concerns in a supportive, respectful environment.

*(Question 12) How should Indigenous-directed/funded research and the commercialization of research (particularly as it pertains to the intellectual property rights of Indigenous peoples) be managed in contemporary research universities?*

Targeted research dollars addressing Aboriginal issues, either from federal research agencies like SSHRC, NSERC, or CIHR, or non-profit sectors (e.g., Vancouver Foundation), presents many ethical considerations for researchers, communities, and institutions. The question is pertinent to the discussion as it relates to ethics and the intellectual property rights of Indigenous peoples. The answer is not an easy one and merits further exploration than is permitted in this space. While understanding the complexity and heterogeneity of Indigenous epistemologies, ontologies, and axiologies, researchers, institutions, and agencies need to respect and uphold Indigenous peoples' intellectual property rights. The knowledge that is shared by Aboriginal peoples does not negate their intellectual and cultural ownership of this knowledge.

It is important for educational institutions to recognize that there is a difference between private and public knowledges, and that Indigenous knowledge as it is discussed, theorized, and practiced within an institution is different from traditional Indigenous knowledges

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<sup>3</sup> SAGE began with the guidance and leadership of Dr. Graham Smith and Dr. Jo-ann Archibald with the financial support of the BC Ministry of Advanced Education and the Vancouver Foundation. To learn more about SAGE see Archibald, Pidgeon, and Hawkey (2009).

(Pidgeon, 2008). This in part relates to place—the geography and location of knowledges informs the kind of knowledge and understanding one can gain, engage in, and utilize. There are ethical guidelines that inform researchers of their rights and responsibilities when working with Aboriginal communities (e.g., Alaska Knowledge Network, 1993; Mi'kmaq Ethics Committee and College Institute, 1997; Piquemal, 2001; Smith, 1999). There are also intellectual rights inherent in Indigenous research, in that the knowledge that is shared by community members remains theirs. Many communities now require researchers to submit to community ethical review processes and/or enter into memoranda of understanding with regards to research data and dissemination<sup>4</sup>.

*(Question 16) How should pursuit of knowledge for its own sake be balanced with needs of the labour market, Aboriginal nations, Aboriginal communities, and society as a whole?*

Indigenous research and teaching expands knowledges and empowers Aboriginal peoples, communities, and nations. Consequently, Indigenous research is not simply an exploration as a sole entity. Aboriginal communities are asking for better research relationships that empower their communities in diverse ways in health, Education, Law, Forestry, Biology, Environmental science, Archeology, Linguistics, English, Fine Arts, and Philosophy to name a few. The research questions posed and subsequent research has to be relevant to the community engaged in the research (and remember, communities are broadly conceptualized to include urban, rural, reservation, and off-reservation). In fact, Aboriginal peoples are now seeking reciprocity in their relationships with researchers, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, that addresses building capacity within their own community members to become skilled researchers, policy makers, educators, and leaders.

*(Question 19) How can BC research universities become more successful in retaining the best and brightest Aboriginal faculty and recruiting new Aboriginal faculty?*

Research universities are seeking to improve the recruitment and retention of Aboriginal faculty. The Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) has implemented an annual workshop/forum aimed at supporting Aboriginal faculty members across Canada. It is too early to determine the success of this and other such initiatives; however, as we have learned from the SAGE initiative, if the program honors cultural integrity, and promotes institutional change that meaningfully engages in making the institution relevant and respectful then we can be optimistic. Institutional climate, policies, departmental/faculty environments and practices all influence retention. Each institution then must be aware of its behaviours, policies, and practices and ensure that Aboriginal faculty are not exploited or tokenized.

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<sup>4</sup> For further information on intellectual property, ethics, and research in British Columbia consult the work of Dr. Charles Menzies and Dr. Greg Young-Ing, both at the University of British Columbia.

### *Reciprocity*

*Reciprocal relationships* are key for addressing any questions related to Indigenous people and non-Indigenous governments and institutions. In fact, government-institution-community is just one relationship configuration. Change at the institutional level is dependent on the relationships which exist within the institution, between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal administrators, and among faculty, staff, and students (Pidgeon, 2008).

(Question 6) *What should the relationships be between the research university and Aboriginal community?*

Research universities have a responsibility to continue efforts of maintaining and building new relationships, both within and outside their institutions, and with Aboriginal rural and urban communities. Such efforts best occur through what Linda Smith (1999) called the "seen face"; that is, institutions must not only welcome Aboriginal peoples on their campuses but also immerse the institution within the Aboriginal communities. This requires institutions to be authentically present in both places honoring the principles of reciprocity, relationships, relevance and responsibility.

### *Responsibility*

*Responsibility* through participation takes into account the responsibility that each of us have to Aboriginal education. It requires meaningful long-term engagement in a process that builds on respect, relevance, and relationships.

(Question 4 and 5) *What strategies are needed to improve access to and increase greater PSE participation and degree completion among Aboriginal students (including low income and/or first generation students)?*

Part of the answer to this question relates back to the earlier discussion of who are our Aboriginal students. Institutions will benefit from understanding who their First Nations students are today and who they will be in the future. Primarily such students are female, older than 21, low income, and first-generation. Often these students have dependents. Not all Aboriginal students are funded and many choose not to self-identify therefore knowing who attends an institution can be difficult to ascertain. As stated previously, more Aboriginal students are entering directly from high school. Targeted areas for recruitment would be more Aboriginal males and diversifying the program areas in which Aboriginal students enroll.

Stronger connections are needed between the post-secondary system and the K-12 system that sees cooperation and proactive engagement in issues of Aboriginal retention and transition from K-12 to post-secondary. These connections between education and the following indicators (e.g., housing, health, poverty, and socio-economic status, and community economic development) consequently have to relate to the lived realities of Aboriginal communities, whether urban or rural.

*(Question 10) What is the role, and benefit, of further developing the link between Indigenous research and Indigenous pedagogy in BC's post-secondary system?*

Question 10 relates to issues of relevance and respect. Research continues to show the importance of having Aboriginal students, faculty, and staff see themselves in the curriculum, policies, and practices of an institution in terms of recruitment and retention (See for example, Archibald et al., 2009; Archibald et al., 1995; Pidgeon, 2008; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). As Indigenous research processes, theories, and pedagogies become part of the K-12 and post-secondary system, it is not just Aboriginal peoples who will benefit, non-Indigenous peoples will also benefit from learning about and from Indigenous perspectives.

*(Question 11) How should research universities respond to the government direction of and implicit hierarchies within Aboriginal funding at the provincial and national levels?*

Post-secondary institutions can play important advocacy and lobbying roles at provincial and national level, outside and within their institutions regarding Aboriginal funding. In fact, there are broader institutional benefits to addressing inadequacies in Aboriginal funding. Institutions should consider alliance-building with other groups, particularly Aboriginal organizations and nations which may enhance institutional reputation within the communities and more importantly, support Aboriginal students through quality academic programming, support services, and financial aid programs.

*(Question 14) What Indigenous accountability mechanisms will ensure public universities spend public monies for intended purpose and are fulfilling Aboriginal mandates without government directly or indirectly violating institutional autonomy?*

Indigenous accountability mechanisms, as articulated in Pidgeon (2008), again follow the wholistic framework. This research indicates that accountability extends beyond neo-liberal constructs of accountability determined solely by outcomes. Accountability entails making policy both public and transparent; institutions need to have both internal and external measures that ensure that all policies, programs, services, and practices honor the 4Rs and Indigeneity (Pidgeon, 2008). It is also apparent that Indigenous accountability does not exclude outcomes; in fact, there is a strong need for benchmarks and indicators which are both more inclusive and holistic.

*(Question 17) How should universities seek to Indigenize- locally and globally?*

For those seeking to Indigenize their institutions, efforts should be made to see out both those within the institutions as well as in relevant Indigenous communities for comment, advice and guidance. Listening, respecting, being proactive and acting, are key to transforming, building and maintaining relationships. Institutional transformation can not exist in policy alone; it must occur through sustainable actions that move policy from paper into the lived realities, cultures, and fabrics of our institutions.

*(Question 18) How should BC's degree programs and degree granting institutions be regulated to ensure students are being offered legitimate and high quality educational programs for Aboriginal communities and their students?*

The wholistic framework and the 4Rs provide discussion points around each of these questions. Accountability needs to be articulated through an Indigenous perspective based on the institutional location and Aboriginal community residing within and around the institution.

### Conclusion

Considering how each of us, whether Aboriginal or not, can become an ally and supporter of Aboriginal higher education is the important lesson to take away from this conversation. Ask yourself, "What can I do to help support Aboriginal students, faculty, staff, and/or communities in my role at my institution?"

Such an individual question stems from the larger question of how post-secondary institutions can become more successful places for Aboriginal peoples (Pidgeon, 2008).

*(Question 20) What would a coherent post-secondary education system that considers wholistic success, the 4Rs, and Indigeneity look like?*

I would argue that a system-wide community approach to Aboriginal post-secondary education entails an active dialogue that uses Indigenous research and evidence-based practices to inform policy and practice. Reiterating Kirkness and Barnhardt's 4Rs calls again for systemic changes across the educational system that has as its foundation and fabric respect for Indigenous cultural integrity; reciprocal relationships that are meaningful and engaging; programs and services are relevant and reciprocal to the Indigenous communities, locally and globally; and responsible participation in all aspects of Indigenous peoples' lives. This dialogue and systemic transformation cannot merely be left to those in the larger research universities in the province. Thinking wholistically, this active dialogue and reflective practice must include all of us involved in Aboriginal education, as institutions, faculty, staff, students, advocacy groups, Aboriginal organizations, and communities. An ongoing cross-institution, agency, and government collaboration is needed to further advance academic opportunities for Aboriginal peoples by providing culturally relevant academic programs, support services, and learning environments that are respectful to all Aboriginal peoples. The actions to make systemic changes can not happen in research universities alone, the relationships between the post-secondary systems, early-childhood, and K-12 education should strengthen and nurture these systemic changes across the life span to benefit each British Columbian.

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## Appendix I: The 20 questions Indigenized.

(Question 1) *What explains BC's Aboriginal peoples' historically low participation rate? How can their participation rates be increased?*

(Question 2) *In considering a learning environment designed to maximize success based on Indigenous epistemology, ontology, and axiology, what support mechanisms need to be in place for faculty and students?*

(Question 3) *How do Aboriginal participation rates vary by region? To what extent does the availability of a university or other institution locally reduce differences? What challenges face multi-campus research universities?*

(Question 4 and 5) *What strategies are needed to improve access to and increase greater PSE participation and degree completion among Aboriginal students (including low income and/or first generation students)?*

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(Question 7) *How can institutions develop optimal policies to attract Aboriginal students, increasing accessibility and maintain adequate funding levels for research universities?*

(Question 8) *What funding framework would provide research universities with adequate and predictable operating grants to support Indigenous growth and development across the institution?*

(Question 9) *How should BC fund Aboriginal graduate student spaces and recruit and retain the best and brightest Aboriginal graduate students?*

(Question 10) *What is the role, and benefit, of further developing the link between Indigenous research and Indigenous pedagogy in BC's post-secondary system?*

(Question 11) *How should research universities respond to the government direction of and implicit hierarchies within Aboriginal funding at the provincial and national levels?*

(Question 12) *How should Indigenous-directed/funded research and the commercialization of research (particularly as it pertains to the intellectual property rights of Indigenous peoples) be managed in contemporary research universities?*

(Question 13) *What governance structures (including Aboriginal governance models) might universities learn from to offer high quality educational programs and advance frontiers of Indigenous knowledge?*

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*(Question 17) How should universities seek to Indigenize- locally and globally?*

*(Question 18) How should BC's degree programs and degree granting institutions be regulated to ensure students are being offered legitimate and high quality educational programs for Aboriginal communities and their students?*

*(Question 19) How can BC research universities become more successful in retaining the best and brightest Aboriginal faculty and recruiting new Aboriginal faculty?*

*(Question 20) What would a coherent post-secondary education system that considers wholistic success, the 4Rs, and Indigenuity look like?*

**Bio**

Dr. Michelle Pidgeon is from Newfoundland and Labrador. She currently is an assistant professor in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, Canada. Dr. Pidgeon's research interests focus on exploring ways in which Indigenous knowledges can inform student services practices and institutional transformation in support of Aboriginal postsecondary student success.