20 May 2015

**Report**

Canadian Association of Graduate Studies

“Imagining Future Research Challenges: Graduate Student Research in Canada”

Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Regina

Randal Rogers

**Preamble**

The Faculty of Graduate Studies at the University of Regina held a roundtable for graduate students on 14 April 2015. While considering the issue of graduate student research widely, our focus question was: “How are the experiences and aspirations of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada essential to building a successful shared future?” Participants included: 12 graduate students; 1 postdoctoral fellow; 1 community partner; 4 discussion presenters; 1 facilitator. The majority of the participants self-identified as Indigenous/Aboriginal/Métis. Participants were primarily from Humanities/Social Science disciplines and we had broad disciplinary representation from across the University of Regina. Three framing presentations included: Indigenous Initiatives at the University of Regina; Indigenous Peoples’ Health Research; Graduate Students and Research. These were followed by two breakout group discussions and a group synthesis session. Lively, vigorous and critical discussions were attended by sharp and incisive commentary throughout the afternoon.

**Legacies: “Our research is fighting despair” – Jo-Ann Episkenew**

When considering the place of graduate study/research in the experiences and aspirations of Aboriginal peoples, our discussions repeatedly returned to the legacies of colonialism in Canada in the shaping of contemporary Indigenous identities. Despite the discourse of multiculturalism in Canada — and especially its reliance on the positive public presentation of Indigenous peoples — the legacies of colonialism remain just as colonialist ideologies continue at all levels of Canadian society and culture. Members of our reporting group noted innumerable examples of colonialist thought and action in personal, professional, community, political, and social life. Yet, while respondents felt that it is important to note the legacies of colonialism, it was also strongly felt that we need to move beyond a victim mentality as we address Indigenous history and education in Canada. Nevertheless, the effects of the long history of oppression of Indigenous peoples in Canada continue to be felt and experienced.

In terms of education the legacies of colonialism are ubiquitous and tenacious. The trauma of the residential school system remains embedded in Indigenous peoples’ lives through both direct experience and inter-generational knowledge. Without reparation and healing such trauma is compounded by racism and inequity in the education system for Indigenous students from K-12 through university. Endemic poverty and attitudes toward education further compound barriers from the earliest age. The question of education’s goals and efficacy for Indigenous students is important. If education fails to provide the tools necessary to transform lives then how is it possible to expect students to value education? With completion rates far below national averages, Indigenous children are also less likely to grow up in an environment that values education for education’s sake. However, from a pragmatic standpoint the K-12 system also can be seen to provide little of use for Indigenous youth who enter a job market in which unemployment rates also exceed mainstream levels. This inequity is compounded further for those living on reserves, where systemic and systematic inequity marks education systems (i.e. federal government per student funding is a fraction of that for non-reserve students). While this context is not universal it remains a far-reaching one for Indigenous students and educators. As one person from our group stated: “The K-12 system simply has to change in order for things to change at the university level.”

With inequity embedded in the education system infrastructural, institutional, individual and community challenges are ever-present, with change being difficult to effect and maintain. The resulting marginalization produces a replication of achievement levels. Paternalism, distrust, barriers to access, tuning out of Native issues, outright racism, lack of training, knowledge and understanding on the part of teachers and administrators, etc -- these all point to a system that fails Indigenous students. One result is that Indigenous students are far less likely to complete high school education, much less consider the possibility of university as an option.

At the same time, Indigenous peoples represent a significantly growing population in Canada. In Saskatchewan such growth is noted in public discourse, where its effects on communities, public health, and education are viewed as important to Saskatchewan’s future. Yet, as an issue it was broadly believed in our discussions that little is being done by government to address the changes that are occurring let alone the future of such demographic shifts. At the same time, individuals, researchers, groups, institutions, etc. within Indigenous communities have worked hard to lead efforts to assist the positive transformation of Indigenous peoples, communities and cultures.

**Communities: “We do this work because we care about our communities” - Angela Snowshoe**

If a single theme of importance arose from our discussions it must be that of Indigenous scholars’ commitment to their communities. One participant, Dr Jo-Ann Episkenew spoke eloquently of this: “There is a quote that I recall from Dr. Rebecca Cardinal Sockbeson that says ‘As the first generation of Indigenous scholars we are the data we want to collect.’ I could just be your plain old English professor…but I have a moral imperative to work with my community. Everything I do is not about objective scholarly intention, it is my life.” This sentiment was echoed by several participants in our discussion and marks both the ethical imperative that scholars feel and the weight of such responsibility. The impacts for research will be discussed in the following section. This section will focus on community engagement in the multiple ways that it is understood and articulated.

Community is deeply valued by Indigenous scholars, who wish to support and build community through their research and in the communities with which they engage. The question of a moral imperative to serve one’s community was a consistent thread throughout our discussions. Given the histories and ongoing struggles of Indigenous communities, scholars feel a responsibility to work with and through them in efforts to heal, build, maintain, and advocate for Indigenous peoples and cultures. Participants repeatedly noted the direct link between the research they work on and the impact of it on the communities they work with. Research is not abstract but is a necessary and pragmatic activity in which one’s findings matter to the people one studies in direct ways.

Such commitment to community comes with an increased sense of responsibility, as well as a level of work that is markedly higher, our participants noted. Part of the puzzle is generational, as the quote above indicates. Not only do Indigenous scholars need to perform research, but they also have to build infrastructure and capacity, to be embedded in the research in deep ways through intimate ties (at times familial), to their communities to develop ongoing relations to their community as researchers, to be the data they study, and then to attend to ongoing community challenges that are often personal and/or familial. The sense of the weight of this work and responsibility was noted by several of our participants. With burnout being a constant threat, persistence and motivation are intermittent challenges.

If commitment to community outside of the academy is important, commitment within it is also of vital importance. The lack of Indigenous scholars, teachers, mentors, administrators, etc. is a constant challenge for professors and students alike. For professors, the feeling of being unmoored from community, of having insufficient support for research and teaching, of others not knowing of or respecting the research and teaching that Indigenous scholars work on, of insufficient numbers of scholars to adequately address peer support and guidance, of finding ways to locate Indigenous students and support their study and research, of building systems to support Indigenous research and teaching, of funding research and teaching -- each of these is a constant pressure on Indigenous scholars and teachers. There are surely other pressures that could mentioned apart from this short list. These challenges are mirrored from the student perspective. From feeling isolated from like-students, to not finding themselves reflected or valued within the curriculum and classroom, to peer and professor racism, to outside pressures from family, work, etc., to having few role models within the education system, to having few professors with whom to work on Indigenous research and teaching, to constant financial and funding issues - the barriers to Indigenous student success remain at the university level, and are perhaps more acute. Repeatedly, the idea that Indigenous faculty members and students were successful despite the institution rather than because of it emerged in our discussions.

In this light efforts related to indigenization at the University of Regina, as elsewhere, are viewed with skepticism. Such efforts include: the establishment of an Indigenous Advisory Circle to the President; hiring of an Executive Lead for Indigenization; development of a strategic plan that incorporates indigenization at every level; dedicated required curricula; and various faculty initiatives. For our participants these measures, while valued, do not yet go far enough to make structurally significant permanent change for Indigenous scholars and students. As such, Indigenization efforts are widely perceived as “window dressing.” Participants noted that whenever the University wishes to look good they are called to a photo-opportunity where it is understood that they are to “look like an Indian.” There is a serious lack of connection between the administration, with its need to publicize, and the on-the-ground experience of Indigenous professors and students. One participant insisted that hiring and retaining Indigenous scholars is the key to developing a “real” plan to indigenize the university, while another added that infrastructural considerations are key (i.e. funding spaces, scholars, mentors, advocates, students).

Indigenous researchers and students are role models for thinking about community, engagement, research. Their unique experience and approaches to research and teaching are models for the university.

**Research and Methods: “We need to redo first contact”**

When it comes to questions of research the challenges noted above are replicated. Indigenous graduate students, one participant noted, come to the University of Regina because it provides them with the nearest connection to home communities and family. At the same time, with few Indigenous scholars and limited curricular offerings locating support for the kinds of research they wish to do is a challenge. In this context much effort is required of the student to self-administer/educate in ways that are required less of other students. Connection to supervisors, peer researchers and access to supports necessary to success need significant development. Funding for Indigenous students needs to be reconsidered, not along lines of the history of their own academic performance, which may have been challenged prior to entry to graduate study, but along lines that capture the unique situation of Indigenous students. Participants also expressed annoyance at the perception that Indigenous students are educated for free, whether through dedicated scholarships or band support. “It is simply not true.”

Engagement with community, as mentioned, is a key imperative for much Indigenous research. This brings a number of challenges. Peer-reviewed journal publications and books are not the best way to serve the communities in which research takes place. Community-based publication that can be read, understood and implemented in the community within which research takes place is much more appropriate. The research needs to directly influence and benefit the community, according to our participants. With performance review paradigms as they currently stand, such forms are undervalued in relation to conventional forms of scholarly dissemination. Compounding a privileging of peer-reviewed journal publications are the ways that mainstream research is done, with its emphasis on objective distance from the subject being researched. As one participant stated: “My research involves people that I have pre-existing relationships with” while others noted the importance of close personal narrative and autobiography: “We need to honour the personal and collective, and disregard the academic canon for its attending relations rooted in hierarchy, distance and power.” Several noted the challenges of receiving ethics approval for their research because of the perceived risks the University believes their research to hold. As one student participant, Cassandra Wajuntah, said: “Indigenous students want to stay here, to remain close to their communities. UofR benefits from this but does not properly support Indigenous students who choose to remain in their communities and do research that aids the community directly.” She adds that there is a fundamental lack of understanding of what it means to do Indigenous research. Researchers need to build close relationships with their participants, to get to know them, to understand the community, to develop real trust before a cooperative relationship develops. This is often done through connections based on family and friendship relations, which is devalued as an approach in conventional research. Research needs to connect tradition to contemporary issues. It is about community sharing, about sharing stories. It always needs community input, and it requires commitment to support communities after research is complete. The timeframe for this process has a much longer arch than conventional research, or of a graduate program. How, then, can these alternative forms and needs be supported through a conventional framework for research?

Decolonization is a central theme threaded through our discussions. As a process it will not only assist to support researchers and teachers with their work, it is also the process through which broad-based change across all research and teaching can occur. Our participants insisted that decolonization is essential to their own practices and is a major contribution that could be made to contemporary scholarship and pedagogy. As one participant put it: “It is not about how Indigenous research fits into mainstream research as much as it is about how research can be transformed through Indigenization.” Beyond the need to transform mainstream views of Indigenous peoples and cultures, which is important in itself, participants discussed how Indigenization can transform research and teaching away from hierarchies rooted in power relations and capture new forms, methods, relations, etc. For our participants, Indigenous epistemologies and practices have the potential to transform research, scholarship, and pedagogy as now understood -- even the nature of the university one participant noted. In this, Indigenous scholars and students are at the forefront of not only their fields but the potential transformation of the university itself. For this we need to train Indigenous researchers in communities, to create decolonizing spaces throughout the university, to promote interdisciplinary knowledge that does not privilege science methodologies, to develop collaboration between researchers and partners and with/between graduate students, to remove barriers to Aboriginal participation in university and its cultures, to restructure funding toward a transformative model that does not culturally discriminate and is capable of changing as projects develop, to continue to consider how to transform university life through Indigenous and other non-hierarchical ways of knowing and being. In short, as participant Jo Ann Episkenew put it: “We need to redo contact. How, then, could we figure things out differently?”

**Futures**

In our final discussion several ideas surfaced and were repeated. While our participants willingly took an extra afternoon away from their work and lives to be at our roundtable, the frustration at doing everything possible to ethically occupy their roles as students, researchers, professors with little support and understanding arose often. Tantamount to this was the generalized feeling that while they are doing everything they can, the university is not upholding its end of the contract. While it is understood that large bureaucracies change slowly and only through struggle, the urgency for the needed transformation continues to place Indigenous students and researchers at risk – not to mention the communities they serve. While short-term solutions are needed, only a long-term radical transformation can address/redress the current and historical place of Indigenous peoples inside the university and in the communities it serves. This includes the organizations and agencies that provide support to students and scholars. While our participants thought that recent changes begin to reflect this need (ARIS), they are not sufficient to provide redress to those for whom long-standing inequity keeps them outside the institution and ineligible for support within it based on current models. As one of our participants put it: “We are not talking about reform. A revolution in thinking about universities and research support is what is needed.”

**FGSR/CAGS Roundtable**

**“Imagining Future Research Challenges: Graduate Student Research in Canada”**

**10 April 2015 1-4:30pm**

**Location: University of Regina, North Residence, Room 110.3**

**Date and Time: 10 April 2015, 1-4:30pm**

**Agenda**

**Introductory Comments**

Randal Rogers, Associate Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

Welcome, Acknowledgments and Food Sharing

Introduction to Project

Participant Introductions

**Framing the Discussions**

Carmen Robertson, SSHRC Lead for the University of Regina

Indigenization Initiatives at University of Regina and SSHRC ARIS

Jo-Ann Episkenew, Director, Indigenous Peoples Health Research Centre

Research and the Indigenous Peoples Health Research Centre

Jo-Lee Sasakamoose, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education

Angela Snowshoe, Lecturer, Faculty of Education

Graduate Students and Research

**Break**

**Discussions**

Roundtable 1

Graduate Student Research: Value, Roles, Opportunities and Challenges

Roundtable 2

Aboriginal Graduate Education/Research: Experiences, Issues, Opportunities

Roundtable 3

Synthesis: Future Importance to Research and Canada

**Closing Remarks**

**Giving Thanks**

**List of Participants**

Jacqueline Belhumeur, Education (PhD)

David Benjoe, Interdisciplinary Fine Arts (MA)

Valerie Brooks, Education (MEd)

Lori Campbell, Education (MEd)

Xiujuan Chen, Engineering, (PhD)

Cheyanne Desnomie, History (MA)

Jo-Ann Episkenew, IPHRC

Larissa Flister, Applied Economics and Policy Analysis (MA)

Bridget Keating, Interdisciplinary Fine Arts (PhD)

Misty Longman, Aboriginal Student Centre (MA)

Adam Martin, Sakewewak Artists’ Collective Inc.

Osazuwa Osayomwanbor, Sociology and Social Studies (MA)

Carmen Robertson, Fine Arts

Julian Robbins, PhD, IPHRC Postdoctoral Fellow

Randal Rogers, FGSR

JoLee Sasakamoose, Education

Angela Snowshoe, Education (PhD)

Cassandra Wajuntah, JSGSPP (PhD)

**Items for information:**

Please look at the basic roundtable themes/ questions and think about them prior to attending.

Have a look at SSHRC’s “Imagining Canada’s Future” website and explore some of the links:

http://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/society-societe/community-communite/Imagining\_Canadas\_Future-Imaginer\_l\_avenir\_du\_Canada-eng.aspx