

OSI Faculty Workshop: Summary

24-25 April 2025

Introduction

Following the release of the [Final Report from the Office of the Independent Special Interlocutor for Missing Children and Unmarked Graves and Burial Sites associated with Indian Residential Schools](#) (OSI) in October 2024, Dr. Mary Jane McCallum (History) and Kathryn Boschmann (Research Director, Manitoba Indigenous Tuberculosis History Project) wanted to find a way to bring this important report to the University of Winnipeg (UW). This resulted in a 1.5-day workshop in April 2025 with 16 participants in total (13 faculty, 2 staff, 1 administration). Participants were tasked with reading a chapter of the report and submitting a brief pre-recorded video presentation in advance. These were compiled and watched on the first day of the workshop. During the second day, participants discussed and shared ideas of how the report could be mobilized at UW.

Obligations

Rather than set out “recommendations” in the Final Report, the Special Interlocutor opted to identify the legal, moral, and ethical obligations of government, churches, and other institutions – including universities – in accordance with the UN Declaration, Indigenous laws, international human rights and criminal law, and Canadian constitutional law. These can be found in the [Executive Summary: Final Report on the Missing and Disappeared Indigenous Children and Unmarked Burials in Canada](#) (p. 209-222).

Obligations 15, 16, 31, and especially 39 describe the obligations of universities, and provide clear directions to universities for responding to this report and moving towards true reconciliation and reparations. They are copied below for easy reference. It should be noted, however, that there are other Obligations which do not explicitly identify universities, but which are nonetheless applicable to them. An understanding of all 43 Obligations by UW is required.

15. All institutions, including federal, provincial, territorial, and municipal departments and archives, church entities and **universities**, and other organizations that hold records relating to Indigenous Peoples must:

- Create a proactive plan to search their record systems and archives for information about the missing and disappeared children and unmarked burials and create a public, transparent, and accessible inventory of these records;
- Work to transfer these records to Indigenous Peoples, in compliance with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Indigenous data sovereignty principles; and
- Provide education and training for archivists and staff on international human rights laws and principles, including the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the Joinet-Orentlicher Principles.

16. The federal government, in consultation and collaboration with Indigenous Peoples, must enact federal legislation creating a statutory requirement for all individuals, governments, churches, **universities**, and organizations that hold records relating to children at Indian Residential Schools and associated institutions to register their holdings in a National Records Registry. This Federal Right to Truth legislation must:

- Specify a time frame for the registration of holdings;
- Require federal departments and agencies, including Library and Archives Canada and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), to provide notice to Indigenous families and communities if they wish to destroy records that relate to them. No records shall be destroyed without their consent;
- Create an offence for destroying or altering such records;
- Include penalties for failing to abide by the time frame and requirements set out in the legislation; and
- Include appropriate enforcement powers and mechanisms.

The preamble should state that, consistent with the right to the truth, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and the Joinet-Orentlicher Principles, it is in the collective public interest that all records relating to Canada's treatment of Indigenous Peoples be preserved.

31. Federal, provincial, and territorial governments, churches, the RCMP, **universities**, and any other organizations that supported and/or operated Indian Residential Schools and associated institutions must apologize for the multiple harms they committed against the missing and disappeared Indigenous children, their families, and communities. For these apologies to meet the criteria of Indigenous Peoples and the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence, they must:

- Establish a full and accurate public record of the historical injustices and ongoing harms of genocide, colonization, and mass human rights violations; and
- Commit to further substantive material and symbolic reparations and actions in accordance with international human rights law.

39. **Universities** must make reparations for their role in supporting settler colonialism and perpetrating harms against Indigenous Peoples, including children at Indian Residential Schools and other associated institutions. These should include:

- Establishing investigations into their past complicity in mass human rights violations against Indigenous Peoples;
- Performing audits and studies relating to their research, reports, and academic publications on Indigenous people and communities, including medical experimentations;
- Identifying the professional benefits accrued to the university and individual academics and professors;
- Issuing apologies for human rights breaches and their involvement in State-sponsored crimes against humanity; and
- Any other reparation measures identified in consultation with Indigenous Peoples.

Summary of Workshop Discussion

*Below we summarize some of the key themes that came out of the rich discussions at the workshop. Identified action items have been marked in **bold**.*

The report establishes how Canada had internally and internationally agreed to a set of human rights rules and norms but refused to apply these to Indigenous children in the Indian Residential School (IRS) system and associated institutions where children were sent, such as Indian hospitals, sanatoria, homes for unwed mothers, and prisons.

With roots in the United Church, the UW has clear connections to the IRS system and, as such, the institution has an obligation to understand this history, combat denialism and settler amnesty, and seek ways to make reparations. This should be reflected in UW policy and administration.

Current published histories of the UW as an institution are dated. There has been more recent work done, including a 2021 panel marking the 150th anniversary of Manitoba College which examined the College's connections with IRS. However, the research undertaken for the presentation is not published and, while the presentation was recorded, it is not yet widely accessible (although it will be donated to the UW Archives).

Researchers want to set up a working group to collaborate on further research on this topic. Truth must come before reconciliation and this research is a crucial step in acknowledging and apologizing for the UW's complicity in this genocidal system. As such, **this research must be funded by the University.** The UW can learn from other universities who are examining their histories of slavery and dispossession, including how this research has been funded and who undertook this work. Researchers want to notify the Provincial Government that addressing the OSI's Obligations necessitates financial and ideological support.

As research into this history is undertaken, care must be given to the knowledge that is generated about the UW's past which has previously been forgotten and suppressed, feeding into the larger patterns of settler amnesty and denialism in Canada. **This information could be shared on campus through:**

- **Teach-ins about UW's history of complicity.**
- **QR codes around campus that lead to webpages sharing the UW's history with IRS and other colonial systems.**
- **Formal publications on the UW's history.**

- **An art internship which engages with this past.**
- **An apology from the UW for its role in colonial genocide informed by the historical research on the university's past (truth before reconciliation).** Apologies were recognized in the Final Report as essential to reparations in acknowledging the harm that was done and working towards repairing trust (*Upholding Sacred Obligations*, Vol 2, pg. 1018). Participants also noted that apologies are important in creating a public record which works towards combating denialism.

Colonization is rooted in Indigenous dispossession of land and land reparations are central to healing relationships with Indigenous people. **UW should undertake a university-wide audit of current institutional properties and land use and review its current engagement in the Land Back movement.**

Reparations could be extended to knowledge of Indigenous languages. For example, Indigenous students at the UW need to pay in order to learn their languages, marking one of the many ways that UW continues to benefit from settler amnesty and Indigenous dispossession. This is something that could be addressed using a reparations framework.

A critical examination of Indigenous student enrollment and completion rates could provide information to understand if and how Indigenous students actually benefit from their time at UW and point to institutional changes that would centre their experiences.

All leadership at the University – including the President, Vice-Presidents, Chairs, and members of Senate and Board of Governors – should be familiar with the key concepts and the Obligations laid out in the OSI Final Report. Some of this could be achieved through **teach-ins on the OSI report and on other connected reports** (including the Truth and Reconciliation Commission reports and the final report from the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls).

Holding events during Truth and Reconciliation Week in September was discussed but it was noted that greater capacity is needed for the events planned around this week. Often Indigenous staff and faculty end up taking on the vast majority of the labour needed to make these events happen. Rather than condensing everything into one week, **UW could commit to holding educational events throughout the year.** These should be funded by the UW as part of the University's reconciliation work and cannot draw solely from the resources of the Office of Indigenous Engagement. In addition, **faculty and staff should be encouraged to volunteer during TRC week and at other reconciliation events held**

throughout the year. Perhaps a formal university-wide and faculty-representative service committee could be struck to organize and plan year-round programming.

Participants supported a campus-wide revitalization of the **Indigenous Course Requirements (ICR)**. As this initiative is drawing close to the 10-year mark, it would be a good time to enter into some reflection. A key issue raised concerning the ICRs was that the initiative was introduced without building in greater capacity. It was also observed that **many students would benefit from some initial groundwork before taking an ICR to help them address questions based in racist assumptions.** These assumptions are not necessarily the fault of the students as they are foundational to Canada's narrative about itself which is founded in anti-Indigenous racism. In addition, the quality of Indigenous history education within the public education system varies wildly, meaning students arrive at UW with very different levels of understanding of this past. Ensuring some groundwork is done with students could be an important step towards protecting the Indigenous faculty who teach ICRs and the Indigenous staff who provide student support from needing to continually confront these racist attitudes.

Faculty supported integrating the OSI Final Report into future classes. In particular, the sections on settler amnesty and denialism were identified as powerful classroom tools. Participants noted that it can be difficult to gauge in the moment how to correct students who bring up denialist talking points without alienating them while also avoiding perpetuating additional harm against Indigenous students in the classroom. One possible way this could be done is to highlight the rhetorical strategies of denialism outlined in the OSI Final Report. Participants noted the distinction between counterfactual denialism and insidious denialism. Insidious denialism includes narratives which emphasized that those who ran Residential Schools had good intentions. The Final Report provides tools to counter this claim and make the point that, regardless of the intentions or politics of individuals, IRS staff and the religious institutions that ran these schools were key tools in a system of colonial genocide and benefitted from this system. **Developing resources that draw from the Report to support combatting denialism in the classroom and in student support spaces would be valuable tools for faculty and staff.**

UW faculty can play a role in creating systemic change within the public education system by helping to foster better understandings of settler amnesty and denialism among Manitoba teachers. Future work could include offering to be on speaker lists for teachers' professional development events and participating in organizations such as the Manitoba Social Studies Teachers' Association.

UW could make a valuable contribution to communities searching for missing and disappeared children by providing training on archives and archival research, perhaps

through the creation of micro-credentials through the UW PACE program. It was acknowledged that, while this would be helpful in building capacity and guiding researchers through the web of archives which potentially hold relevant records, there is a limit to what can be accessed in archives due to current legislation. **UW should consider how it can contribute to the push for legislative change so that Indigenous families and communities can access records concerning the missing and disappeared children.**

Participants also discussed the need to build community among faculty who could take a clear stand against denialism within departments. During this conversation, questions of academic freedom were raised, including how to measure this freedom against denialism. **The issue of faculty who use academic freedom to perpetuate harm and face no consequences for their actions needs to be addressed.** Academic freedom is not freedom with impunity. **One way to address this would be to incorporate denialism and settler amnesty into the UW *Respectful Working and Learning Environment Policy and Procedure*.** This could provide an avenue for corrective or disciplinary action when required. Participants also discussed how some of the desired results could be achieved through other means, drawing inspiration from how the OSI Final Report centers relationships. Building a community among scholars must also include protecting those who are harmed by hate speech and denialism. **Addressing the hate speech of denialism must go hand-in-hand with addressing hate speech directed towards the LGBTQ2S+ community by UW staff and faculty.¹ Junior faculty could also benefit from greater mentorship in navigating these challenges both within the classroom, their departments, service work, and beyond.**

Faculty who take on a public facing role in raising awareness about Indigenous history and countering denialism and settler amnesty are subjected to harassment and threats. **UW needs to consider not only how to recognize and compensate this labour, but also how to keep these faculty members safe, mentally and physically.**

Participants agreed that there is a need to carry these discussions and the OSI Final Report and Obligations into their classrooms, service committee work, research and scholarship, and governance.

¹ A key example of this is a UW librarian who has recently participated in an extensive interview on the YouTube channel of a public figure known for their residential school denialism and transphobia, promoting harmful and dangerous rhetoric about transgender and Two-Spirit people.