



**Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research Programme**  
**Research Proposal**

**UNDRIP In Action or Inaction: Evaluating the Effectiveness of the United Nations Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Canada, Australia and New Zealand**

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## **Abstract**

This research investigates how effectively the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) is being used to address systemic inequalities faced by Indigenous Peoples in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, with a particular focus on quality of education. Although Canada has taken a legislative step by passing Bill C-15 (the UNDRIP Act) in 2021, critical questions remain about how, and whether, this legal commitment translates into culturally relevant, high-quality schooling that supports Indigenous self-determination. Australia and New Zealand serve as comparative cases, as both nations have acknowledged UNDRIP but have not yet formally adopted equivalent legislation.

Drawing on official statements, policy documents, and government reports, this study will examine how each country's legal frameworks and Indigenous-led initiatives converge—or fail to converge—on enhancing educational outcomes such as language revitalization, curriculum relevance, and cultural preservation. By analyzing existing programs and court decisions, the research will identify best practices and persistent obstacles. These may include challenges related to funding, jurisdictional disputes, and the marginalization of Indigenous knowledge systems within mainstream curricula.

Ultimately, this project aims to offer a detailed, comparative evaluation of how international instruments like UNDRIP can be harnessed to improve the quality of education for Indigenous communities. In doing so, it will highlight broader lessons for implementing UNDRIP principles in domestic law, underscore the role of Indigenous leadership in policy reform, and provide actionable recommendations to strengthen educational equity across these settler-colonial nations.

## **Introduction**

I choose to explore the implementation of UNDRIP in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand because it offers a compelling lens through which to examine how international agreements translate, or fail to translate, into tangible legal and policy changes. My interest stems from learning how, despite Canada's formal adoption of the UNDRIP Act, disparities continue to persist in Indigenous education and cultural rights. By comparing Canada's approach to UNDRIP adoption in Australia and New Zealand, I aim to showcase the gap between symbolic commitments and meaningful reforms.

This research is also driven by a broader critique of how the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) do not explicitly guarantee Indigenous rights. Without binding enforcement mechanisms, governments can selectively prioritize Indigenous issues, sometimes reducing them to little more than "buzzwords." Examining how UNDRIP principles are incorporated into, or sidelined by, the SDG agenda adopted more widely by 193 countries, will help clarify whether these frameworks truly serve Indigenous communities' needs or if they simply offer theoretical value.

Through my work, I hope to achieve several goals. First, I will evaluate the effectiveness of UNDRIP-based legislation in improving the quality of Indigenous education. Second, I will

identify how Indigenous rights are supported or undermined by each country's legal and policy environment. Finally, I plan to produce actionable recommendations aimed at enhancing legislative accountability, empowering Indigenous communities, and moving beyond symbolic gestures. In doing so, I hope to strengthen my leadership skills in global governance and contribute meaningfully to the discourse on Indigenous rights and reconciliation.

## Research Objectives & Questions

1. *Effectiveness of UNDRIP*: How effective is UNDRIP in addressing systemic inequalities for Indigenous Peoples in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, particularly in relation to the quality of education?
2. *Role of Law*: How does the effectiveness of international agreements like UNDRIP depend on their incorporation into federal law, and what are the factors that determine successful implementation?

## Background

Over the past decade, a growing body of scholarship and policy reports has examined the role of UNDRIP in shaping Indigenous rights. Early UN-led work underscored the potential of this non-binding instrument to advance self-determination, land claims, and cultural preservation. However, subsequent analyses, including those by the Australian Human Rights Commission, highlight ongoing challenges in translating UNDRIP commitments into enforceable law within settler-colonial societies. This disconnect is evident in Australia and New Zealand, where UNDRIP has been acknowledged but not fully legislated, and where Indigenous Peoples continue to advocate for stronger legal frameworks (ANTAR 2022; New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2023). Parallel conversations about the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education)—have further emphasized the need for culturally responsive schooling and Indigenous-led initiatives (DeLuca 2017; BCCIC 2018).

In particular, “Braiding Legal Orders: Implementing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples” by the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) is one of the most in-depth explorations of how UNDRIP can be woven into domestic legal frameworks. While the collection of reports focuses primarily on Canada, it also provides insights that are broadly applicable to other settler-colonial contexts such as Australia and New Zealand. It argues that effective implementation requires formally recognizing Indigenous legal traditions, rather than importing UNDRIP into existing Western frameworks. Although much has been written on the significance of UNDRIP and the challenges of integrating its principles into national legislation, most of this scholarship has centered on issues like self-governance, land rights, and free, prior, and informed consent (Articles 19 and 32 of UNDRIP). Far fewer studies focus on Article 14, which addresses the right to education. The practical steps that governments must take to fulfill Article 14 remain under-examined, despite the role that education plays in preserving Indigenous languages, cultural knowledge, and self-determination.

Moreover, while scholars have recognized the complexities of weaving UNDRIP into domestic legal frameworks, few comparative analyses exist that look at Canada, Australia, and New Zealand side by side, despite these three nations' similar colonial histories and their respective major roles in global Indigenous discourse. Drawing on these studies, this research will

understand how law and policy influence Indigenous educational quality, while critiquing the lack of binding enforcement mechanisms in international frameworks like UNDRIP.

## Methodology

I will employ a mixed-methods approach that integrates both quantitative and qualitative analyses to assess how effectively UNDRIP translates into improved educational outcomes for Indigenous Peoples in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

### Quantitative Methods:

- I plan to collect data from official government reports and statistics, such as school completion rates, literacy levels, educational funding allocations and federal initiatives.
- A regression analysis will help identify correlations between the presence of UNDRIP-aligned policies (e.g., references in legislation, budgetary commitments) and measurable educational indicators (e.g., graduation rates, language proficiency).

### Qualitative Methods:

- Policy Discourse Analysis: I will examine federal and provincial/state policy documents, parliamentary debates, and public statements from each country to see how UNDRIP is cited or overlooked.
- Comparative Case Studies: Building on initiatives like the Mi'kmaw education authority in Nova Scotia, I will evaluate Indigenous-led programs in all three nations for their structure, challenges, and successes. Insights from these cases will illustrate whether UNDRIP-informed policies are making a tangible difference in classrooms and communities.

### Organizations and Supervisors

- Primary supervision will be under Professor Paola Salardi at the Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy, University of Toronto.
- I will also draw on resources from the Centre for Indigenous Studies at the University of Toronto and may reach out to Indigenous-led educational authorities (e.g., Mi'kmaq education authority) or relevant government departments (e.g., Canadian Indigenous Services, Australian Department of Education, New Zealand Ministry of Education) for publicly available data and, if possible, professional insights.

## Timeline

Pre-Research Period		
<i>Weeks</i>	<i>Objective</i>	<i>Resources and Methods</i>

Weeks 1-2: April 1-15	Establish the global and national significance of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples' adoption	Examine the <b>creation, global significance, and historical context</b> of the Declaration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Indigenous representatives and global stakeholders advocating for the protection of Indigenous rights.</li> <li>• The direct role of diverse voices in its creation</li> </ul>
Weeks 3-4: April 15-29	Examine the official statements and justifications provided by the Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand governments when adopting UNDRIP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focusing on their <b>reasons for adoption</b>, official positions, and commitments made to Indigenous rights</li> <li>• <b>What was the timeline of UNDRIP adoption?</b> Were there delays, caveats, or contradictions in their commitments?</li> </ul>
Weeks 5-6: May 1-15	Identify and gather key resources for the summer research period	Conduct library and database searches for relevant books, peer-reviewed articles, and government reports
Weeks 7-8: May 15-29	Reach out to potential interviewees (professors, professionals, and researchers) in Indigenous studies, law, and policy.	Contact local organizations and universities (e.g., U of T) with Indigenous studies programs.  Focus on informal outreach for insights on UNDRIP's integration and its impacts (no ethics board review required).
Weeks 9-10: June 1-15	Preliminary policy discourse analysis of explicit references	Review government documents, statements and reports to identify how UNDRIP is referenced or operationalized, particularly in regard to education
Research Period		
Week 1	Review case studies of Indigenous-led programs under Canada's UNDRIP goals	<b>Explore Key Programs, for example:</b>

<p>Week 2</p>	<p>Review case studies of Indigenous-led programs under Australia and New Zealand’s UNDRIP goals</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anishinabek Nation Education Agreement – Self-governance framework that provides control over education and incorporates Anishinaabe culture and language.</li> <li>• Indigenous Languages Act (Canada) – Review initiatives tied to revitalizing Indigenous languages, such as funding for language programs in schools.</li> <li>• Closing the Gap: Education Targets for Indigenous Australians – Analyze progress toward meeting education targets, particularly the increase in high school completion rates among Indigenous youth.</li> <li>• Te Kura (Māori School) – Evaluate the effectiveness of Māori-medium education programs and their integration with national education goals.</li> </ul> <p><b>Success metrics:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reports on participation rates, success stories, and areas where the programs have faced barriers (e.g. funding, policy resistance, societal attitudes)</li> <li>• What tangible progress has been made? Increased high school graduation rates, improved community governance structures, etc.?</li> </ul> <p><b>Identify Challenges:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• E.g. program scalability, funding shortfalls, and legal or political barriers (e.g., jurisdictional disputes, lack of government support)</li> </ul>
<p>Week 3</p>	<p>Analyze federal legislation and Human Rights Commission reports to assess how the UNDRIP Act has been integrated into Canadian, Australian and New Zealand law.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Examine court rulings and legislative amendments</b> regarding the integration of UNDRIP</li> <li>• <b>Identify gaps</b> between nations’ statements of commitment and implementation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Through most recent updates on initiatives and legislation</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

<p>Week 4</p>	<p>Examine government accountability through public reports.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Key government reports</b> from <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Indigenous Services Canada</li> <li>○ Assembly of First Nations</li> <li>○ United Nations Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Rights</li> <li>○ Australian Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet Indigenous Affairs Report</li> <li>○ New Zealand Ministry of Social Development Māori Development Strategy</li> </ul> </li> <li>• As well as <b>parliamentary debates and ministerial statements</b> to track legislative progress</li> </ul>
<p>Week 5</p>	<p>Conduct a <b>comparative study</b> of the outcomes each country</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Legislative Change:</b> Compare how each nation has translated UNDRIP into policy and legal reforms <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Which nations have integrated UNDRIP principles most comprehensively into law?</li> <li>○ Are there discrepancies between <b>federal statements and local implementation</b> (e.g., provincial or state-level actions)?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Programmatic Success:</b> Compare the success of Indigenous-led programs. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Which programs have demonstrated measurable success in terms of education outcomes or cultural revitalization?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p>Week 6</p>	<p>Identify and analyze key themes that emerge from the comparison</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Success Factors:</b> What are the common elements that have led to successful programs or policies? (e.g., Indigenous self-governance, culturally tailored education programs)</li> <li>• <b>Barriers to Implementation:</b> What are the key obstacles to full implementation of UNDRIP principles in these countries? (e.g., political resistance, lack of funding, jurisdictional disputes)</li> </ul>

		<b>Cross-National Lessons:</b> What can each nation learn from the others? Are there policies from Canada that could be adopted in Australia? Can New Zealand’s success with Māori language preservation inform Canada’s approach to language revitalization?
Post-Research Period		
	Tabulate Key Findings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Categorize data from each country</li> </ul>
	Conduct a <b>quantitative analysis</b> that summarizes each country’s progress in adopting UNDRIP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete the quantitative regression model to correlate UNDRIP-aligned policies with changes in educational metrics</li> </ul>
	Conduct a <b>descriptive analysis</b> that summarizes each country’s progress in adopting UNDRIP.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>What specific policies were introduced</b> in line with UNDRIP principles?</li> <li>• <b>How did Indigenous-led programs</b> fare in each country in relation to the legal integration &amp; government support?</li> </ul>
	Final Deliverable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integrate qualitative &amp; quantitative findings into a cohesive narrative</li> <li>• Complete a report presenting findings and policy implications</li> </ul>

**Potential Impact**

This research addresses a practical need to understand whether an international framework like UNDRIP genuinely improves educational and cultural outcomes for Indigenous Peoples in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. By examining Canada’s formal adoption of UNDRIP and comparing and contrasting it with the steps taken by Australia and New Zealand, this study spotlights both encouraging progress and persistent challenges in implementing Indigenous rights. Its findings will also have broader implications on the effectiveness of the adoption of United Nations declarations, agendas, and similar international and transnational agreements.

Focusing on everyday experiences, such the efficacy of certain initiatives and programs directly related to UNDRIP through mixed-methods analysis gives the work tangible relevance in the field. Ultimately, the study can prompt policymakers, educators, and community leaders toward strategies that prioritize Indigenous perspectives, specifically by highlighting the gaps that still remain in the relationship between governments and Indigenous Peoples of post-colonial nations. These gaps mean we lack a clear understanding of how effectively UNDRIP—and specifically

Article 14—is being realized in the classroom. Education is not only a pillar of individual and community development but also a site for cultural continuity and political empowerment. A focused, comparative study such as this one can shed light on the successes, failures and urgent needs within these critical contexts.

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