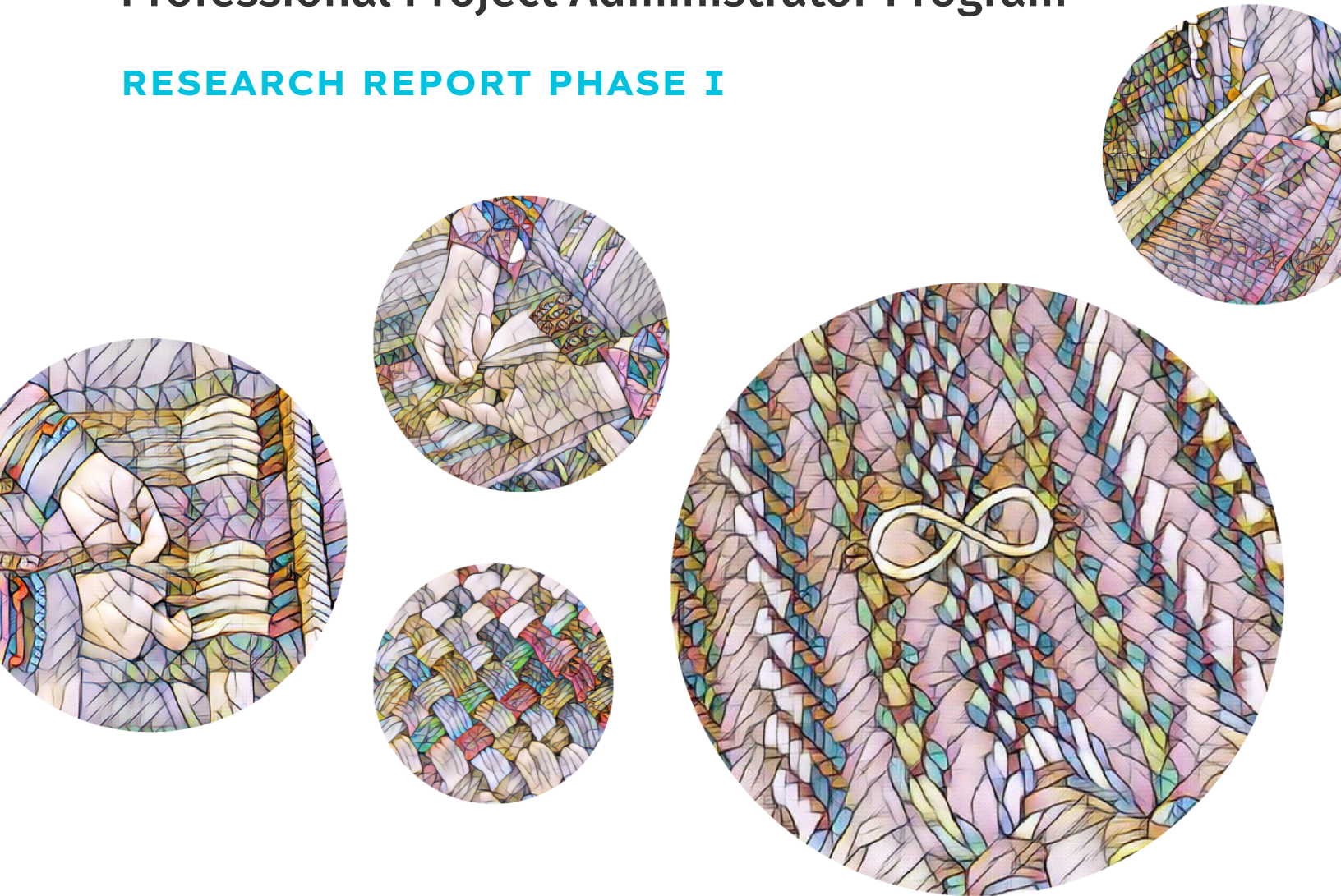# Project Connect
Professional Project Administrator Program

RESEARCH REPORT PHASE I

Each strand represents the experiences and voices of those involved: learners, instructors, support staff, and researchers. Strands woven together are made stronger.

Future Skills Centre

Centre des Compétences futures

Canada

Project Connect Professional Project Administrator Program: Research Report

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Land Acknowledgement & Gratitude

Royal Roads University acknowledges that the campus is on the Lands of the Xwsepsum (Esquimalt) and Lekwungen (Songhees) ancestors and families.

With gratitude, we live, work and learn here where the past, present, and future of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, faculty and staff come together.

We thank our ancestors, our families, and all the people who contributed in some way or another to this project. We express our gratitude to the Métis People who participated in this work. Your time, your feedback, and your experiences are all contributing to improvements in how we deliver our programs.

The researchers would also like to thank RRU Professional and Continuing Studies and the Project Connect team for their support in connecting the researchers with participants, and the participants who each gave their time for the interview conversations.

We also wish to express our gratitude and appreciation to the Future Skills Centre (fsc-ccf.ca). FSC's commitment to understanding what works in terms of career-focused education for Indigenous learners provided the impetus for us to pursue research on the impacts of the PPA program on all participants - not only learners. The funding administered by FSC from the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program enabled us to provide valuable, life changing learning opportunities to students. We have seen tremendous impacts not only for learners, but also for their families, as well as for members of the broader PCS (Professional and Continuing Studies) delivery team. These impacts are outlined in the pages that follow.
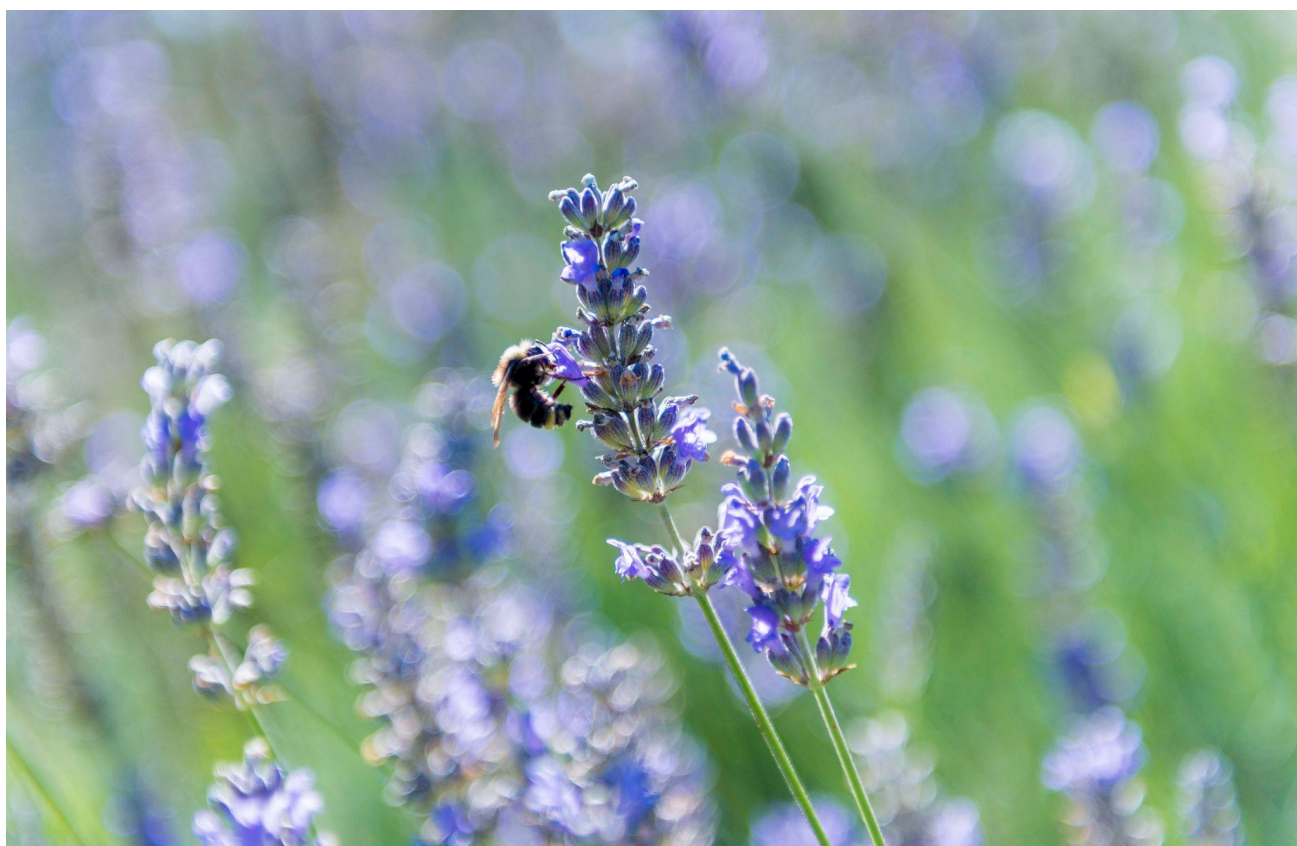
Thank you to Dr. Jo Axe and Dr. Elizabeth Childs for their contributions, support, guidance, and for providing the foundation for this report:

Axe, J., & Childs, E. (July 2022). *Project Connect Professional Project Administrator Program: Research Report. Draft Report.* Victoria, BC: Author.

Introduction

Our dream is to build strong relationships between Indigenous communities and the university, and for learners to thrive in culturally relevant and meaningful learning environments. Project Connect, an employment-focused education program for Indigenous students, emerged from this dream. The project originated in a discussion between staff responsible for training initiatives at Métis Nation British Columbia (MNBC), and a staff member and Project Lead from Professional and Continuing Studies at Royal Roads University.

Through this collaboration and an assessment of the province's labour market, the Professional Project Administrator Program (PPA) was conceived: an innovative mix of credit and non-credit courses aimed at preparing graduates for employment with a broad range of skills in project administration, strong connections to Métis Culture, and wrap-around supports for students (described in more depth in the following pages). Due to the covid-19 pandemic, the program was offered fully online, as opposed to the blended delivery model originally proposed to Future Skills Centre.

It is clear that the PPA program had an impact on students. The Project Connect team saw a 98% retention rate of participants in the three Professional Project Administrator (PPA) program offerings during 2020-2022. Between the three cohorts, 46 students began the program and 45 graduated. As part of a follow up evaluation process in the Fall of 2022, 15 out of 17 of the graduates surveyed indicated that they had positions related to their training in the PPA and two were still looking for employment. Additionally, from LinkedIn profiles, we identified one self-employed graduate and seven employed in positions that required project administration skills.

The purpose of the research project was to investigate the impact of the PPA Program on the learning community, and to identify program design characteristics and student support requirements that could inform similar educational programs in the future. Additionally, the research project adds to Hudsons' (2017) call to provide evidence on the effectiveness of programs focused on Indigenous learners to improve Indigenous student outcomes.

This report documents the comprehensive research undertaken after the Project Connect PPA program offerings during 2021 and 2022. The research findings shed light on the components that contributed to the success of the program, particularly around a supportive online cohort, cultural activities, wrap-around supports, the caring nature of staff and facilitators, and skill acquisition.

Participant stories, as well as more details about the PPA program and the research project, can be found on the Project Connect Website https://rruprojectconnect.com/.

The Professional Project Administrator Program

The goal of the PPA program is to assist students in their goal to become job-ready by providing them with a broad range of transferable skills in project administration, and to connect them to employment opportunities. To achieve this goal, courses in the program focused on the following skills areas: (1) Project management; (2) Collective Leadership; (3) Data management and reporting; (4) Microsoft Office Suite; (5) Proposal writing; (6) Digital literacy; and (7) Communications. All participants in the program are provided with wrap-around supports in career counselling, coaching, and mental health and well-being. Cultural supports are woven throughout the program and supported by the program's Métis Elder. Participants are provided with a laptop and for qualified applicants, a learning stipend facilitated through Métis Nation BC.

- Living allowances through the Indigenous Skills and Employment Training (ISET*) Program facilitated by MNBC
- Technology support (laptop, keyboard, mouse, MS Office 365 subscription)
- Engagement with Elder
- Cultural activities (weaving, beading, jigging, fiddling, Michif language, and more)
- Access to counseling services provided by an Indigenous counselor
- Career development webinars and one-on-one individual career support
- Individual professional coaching sessions

Anticipated high-level outcomes for the PPA program included the following (from the Project Connect Theory of Change):

- participants are engaged in job searches and/or are applying to other educational programs
- a minimum of 80% of graduates are employed 24 weeks post-program in relevant positions/sectors
- Métis Nation BC and other Indigenous communities recognize potential of online programming and incorporate lessons from our training model in their training plans
- project partners continue to collaborate for development and delivery of online training

* Indigenous Skills and Employment Training Program
(https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/indigenous-skills-employment-training.html)

Online Learning within Indigenous Communities: What do we know?

Higher education continues to privilege Euro-centric structures; these are embedded in historical colonial language, discourse and systemic practices that marginalize students (Pirbhai-Illich et. al., 2017). As a result, some Indigenous learners are deterred from classroom-based learning, whether on campus or in community facilities, because of very negative experiences in classrooms in the past (Archibald & Urion, 1995). Nevertheless, on-campus and community-based programs are known contributors to the landscape of effective educational approaches for Indigenous communities.

Educational institutions have been offering alternative credentialing modes that provide quick turnaround reskilling and upskilling for learners. It is a way to adapt to competitive market pressures and to reorient the curriculum towards vocational training. These accessible programs provide an entry point into the educational system and can reach learners who might not consider entering or reentering traditional educational programs (IIC, 2021). Although the skills conversation is important, Pidgeon (2008) posits that many Indigenous students pursue higher education as a 'tool of empowerment' (p. 55) and 'to actualise their goals for self-determination' (p. 24). Therefore, self-determination, rather than financial gain, is the definition of success for many Indigenous students.

Professional Project Administrator Program

STUDENT SUPPORTS

Elder

Living Allowance

Indigenous Counsellor

Cultural Activities

Career Development

Life Coaching

Laptop Office 365 Bundle

Royal Roads UNIVERSITY

COVID-19 increased the number of online course and program offerings and in the process, educational institutions confirmed that online education is an effective way to offer courses in remote locations; it can address geographical barriers and provide opportunities to learners who wish to study in their communities (Prayaga et al., 2017; Bell & McDougall, 2013; Ball, 2007). According to Beaton & Carpenter (2014) a 'learn where you live' model can also improve student retention, recognizing the importance of land and its relationship to Indigenous learners.

In a research project investigating the key supports, barriers, and learning preferences related to the persistence of online Indigenous university students, Walton et al. (2020) found that the strongest factors related to persistence were cultural, social, cognitive, and physical. These findings taken together supported a holistic model that called for more Indigenous faculty and culture; good relationships with faculty and students; positive social environment; time management skills and motivation; computer and literacy skills; and financial support among other factors. According to Cochrane and Maposa (2009) providing accessible and interactive programs; meaningful relationships; flexibility in the pedagogical design; ongoing technological support; and culturally relevant learning approaches are among the key contributors for success in distance education for Indigenous learners.

From a curricular perspective, initial research in the area of online education and Indigenous learners has focused on integrating online learning successfully into the existing practices, beliefs, experiences, and values of learners (McMahon et al., 2019; Pulla, 2017) and recognizing the importance of traditional knowledge (Doering & Henrickson, 2014). Digital storytelling has emerged to incorporate Indigenous knowledge into learning (Loewen & Suhonen, 2018), which highlights the importance of including Indigenous knowledge holders and community members in the online course design process.

Beyond structural changes towards inclusion and anti-oppression, there is certainly a need for workforce inclusion, but also for universities and colleges to take action to address the inequalities that colonization and systemic discrimination have placed on educational attainment. Indigenous peoples represent both the fastest growing and the youngest population in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2022). The future of work in what we now know as Canada has been and will continue to be positively influenced by Indigenous representation and participation in the cultural, social, and political landscape.

Methodology

Woven Together

The Woven Together metaphor, inspired by Spiller's (2020) work, set the foundation for our journey with the research project. It illuminated the process of co-creation: the different colours and strands of the Métis sash reflected the many perspectives, voices and experiences of learners, instructors, staff, researchers, and community members.

The metaphorical weaving and unraveling, the back and forth, the warp and weft brought together different ways of being, thinking and doing. At risk of simplifying and dichotomising our process, we can say that we wove together relational ways of being and doing with institutional ones. In collaboration, we created the tapestry of learnings and experiences recorded in this report.

Using a participatory action research approach (Kemmis, 2008; Reason & Bradbury, 2008; McIntyre, 2008), we followed a qualitative case study methodology due to its flexibility in data collection and analysis. Initially, we wanted to explore the overall impact of the PPA program on students. However, the scope expanded with the possibility of integrating data from focus groups with instructors, career staff, and participant researchers. Therefore, the main research question was defined as *what is the experience of Project Connect graduates and partners, and how does the experience impact them during and beyond program completion?*

The main component of the research was comprised of three sub-cases with each cohort of the PPA participants representing a sub-case. Convenience sampling (Blair & Blair, 2020) was used to recruit research participants with an invitation from the PPA program office to participate in the research project. Invitations to all instructors and career staff to participate in the research were sent out by the program office at different times during the delivery of the PPA Program.

Informed consent clearly explained that the interviews would be conducted by graduates of the same program who had been trained as researchers. The involvement of student researchers became an important component of the research methodology.

Nothing for us, about us, without us

Linda Smith Tuhiwai (2012) shares,

"When Indigenous peoples become the researchers and not merely the researched, the activity of research is transformed. Questions are framed differently, priorities are ranked differently, problems are defined differently, and people participate on different terms." (p. 313).

We knew from the beginning that this research would take a different approach and relate to both knowledge and people in ways that filled our spirits and humanity. As Wilson (2008) describes, knowledge is relational and student researchers had existing relationships with their peers. They also felt a deep commitment to working towards the betterment of their communities and the possibilities of bringing programs like the PPA to other Indigenous learners was exciting.

What is Relational Accountability?

Wilson (2008) proposes this concept in his book Research is Ceremony. At its core, relational accountability is about cultivating and maintaining respectful and reciprocal relationships between researchers and communities they work with. For the student researchers, it was a labour of love, of responsibility, and of care. Not only for their learning communities, but also for their families and for future Indigenous learners completing the PPA Program.

Student Researchers

Upon completion of the PPA Program, graduates received an invitation to take part in the research process as student researchers. Four student researchers were identified for each cohort. Throughout the project, student researchers worked in collaboration with three lead researchers who facilitated a series of online synchronous workshops that focused on the following skills:

- Interviewing techniques
- Data analysis approaches
- Coding and theming data

The training sessions were recorded to allow for repeat viewing as necessary. In addition, all student researchers conducted practice interviews on each other to become familiar with the interview protocol prior to conducting the interviews.

From PPA Student to Project Connect Research Assistant

WEAVING, KNOTS, AND STRANDS

PROGRAM APPLICANT
Questioning

Many of the participants began their journey in the PPA Program unsure of what to expect and where it would lead them.

PROGRAM GRADUATE
18 Weeks Full-Time

After an intensive five months of coursework, the successful graduates were informed of an exciting opportunity. To conduct research on the impact of the PPA program on their fellow students.

RESEARCH ASSISTANT
Specialized Training

In addition to the knowledge they gained in the program, the students were trained in interviewing skills along with data collection, coding, and analysis. The research assistants were then equipped to carry out their work.

PRESENTER OF FINDINGS
Celebration of Findings

After months of interviewing, sorting codes and analyzing their data, the research assistants came together to present the summation of their findings to their community.

At the end of each of the student researchers' data analysis, the team gathered in a *Celebration of Findings* where student researchers shared the findings and process. In each gathering, the graphic recorder turned the themes and quotes into images, as shown in Figures 1-3.

Student researchers had the opportunity to implement their newly acquired project administration skills and managed the project using Microsoft OneNote (see Appendix A). Student researchers did not fully align with the perspective that assumes researchers,

participants, and knowledge are separate entities. As Wilson (2008) states, Indigenous methodology means talking about relational accountability. Student researchers had to be accountable not only to each other and the team but to the research participants because they were members of the learning community, people we knew well and cared about. At times, the plan seemed ambiguous and the tasks challenging, but we trusted the process and each other. We include the project timeline in Appendix B.

Data Sources

Data sources for the research documented in this report included:

- 1-1 interviews with program participants conducted by student researchers
- Focus group with participant researchers
- Focus group with wrap-around support providers
- 2 Focus groups with instructors
- Interview with Elder
- Survey data from the EiLAB online readiness instruments, specifically the Digital Competency Profiler (DCP) and the Fully Online Learning Community Survey (FOLCS) and the Online Readiness Tool Survey (ORTS).

Data Collection Methods

During the three cohorts of the PPA program offered in 2020-2022, 45 of 46 participants completed the program and 33 graduates agreed to be interviewed as part of the research project. The student researchers conducted a series of approximately one-hour semi-structured interviews over Zoom with PPA program participants. Each student researcher chose a set number of interviews to conduct from their cohort depending on how many program participants had consented to an interview. The

experiences of participants were discussed through open-ended questions, which allowed participants to elaborate on their responses to the questions. Participants were provided with a gift card in appreciation of the time they spent in the interview.

Cohort	Total Program Participants	Total Participants who completed the program	Participant Interviews Conducted
1	16	15	12
2	15	15	10
3	15	15	11

Table 1: Total Number of Participants in 2021-2022 PPA Research Project

In addition, participants were sent a web link to complete the EiLAB online readiness tools (DCP, FOLCS & ORTS). Upon clicking the web link the participants were provided with the informed consent invitation to participate that is associated with the EiLAB ethics approval. The DCP tool auto-generates an individual summary document that is emailed directly to the individual from the EiLAB. The raw data from each of the 3 online readiness tools was provided as a data file to the research team.

Cohort	Total Program Participants sent the web link	DCP survey completed	FOLCS survey completed	ORTS survey completed
1	15	3	0	1
2	15	0	0	0
3	15	1	3	3

Table 2: Online Readiness Tool completion by PPA participants

To gather the experiences of instructors and career staff/partners, program staff hosted focus groups. Similarly, an interview was conducted with the Elder after the first three deliveries of the PPA program were completed.

Data Analysis Approach

Program participant interviews were transcribed using Zoom auto transcription and the transcripts were reviewed by each student researcher to ensure accuracy and to correct auto transcription errors in grammar and spelling. The EiLAB online readiness survey data was analyzed using descriptive statistics (Laerd Statistics, 2022).

The thematic data analysis approach as outlined by Braun and Clark (2006) was used by the student researchers to analyze the data. In keeping with this approach, the student researchers reviewed the transcripts to become familiar with the data and then individually generated initial codes. These initial codes were presented by the student researchers at the Celebration of Findings held over Zoom. This showcase provided an opportunity for the cohort student researchers to share their initial themes with each other and the other researchers on the team and discuss initial findings as a group. Each of these showcase sessions were graphically recorded. The resulting graphics were verified for accuracy with the student researchers and are included in the Findings section.

Following the showcase session, the three lead research team members individually analyzed

the data for each cohort set using NVivo Pro 12. Due to the framing of the interview questions, the data was examined using anticipated and emergent codes (Ayres, 2012). Anticipated codes are those that were established in advance as they were the foci of the interview questions. Emergent codes are ones that develop at the sub-code level.

The three lead researchers met and discussed areas of congruence and misalignment in their coding. The researchers then reviewed the student researcher codes per cohort data set and incorporated them into the draft code set for that cohort. Codes were reviewed for themes, which were identified and named through a collaborative process which involved the student researchers and the three lead researchers in a secondary inductive coding process. This resulted in triangulation on a set of final themes for each cohort data set. The three lead researchers then reviewed the final themes identified for each cohort data set to establish the overall themes that were represented in all three cohort data sets (see Appendix C).

Data from the focus groups (instructors, wrap-around support providers, and student researchers) and the Elder interview was analyzed and coded using anticipated and emergent codes. This analysis phase was

conducted by one of the lead researchers and a staff member whose role is to evaluate the overall program.

The research methodology adhered to the research principles of validity, reliability, and objectivity. The research participants' anonymity was assured, and they were made aware of their rights and responsibilities with a consent form.

Ethics

All research was conducted in accordance with the Tri-Council's ethical standards for research (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2018). All participants provided informed consent and the data was managed in accordance with ethical standards. An ethical review was prepared and approved by the Royal Roads University Research Ethics Board.

For the EiLAB online readiness tools, an ethical review was prepared and approved by the University of Ontario Institute of Technology (UOIT) Research Ethics Board.
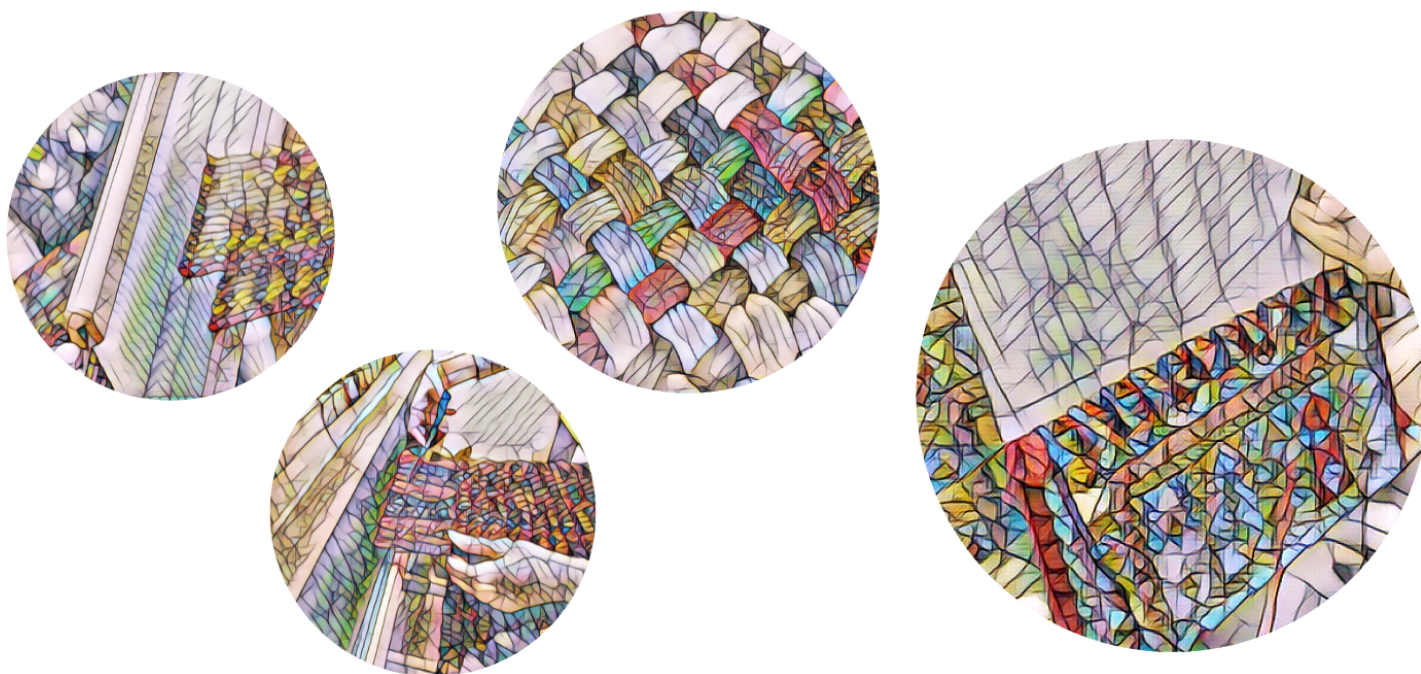
Research Findings

What is the experience of Project Connect graduates and partners, and how do their experiences impact them during and beyond program completion?

In this section, we present the findings of all data sets, focusing specifically on the themes that we identified and quotes from research participants that provide some insight to that theme. First, we present the graphic recordings for each of the three Celebration of Findings where the themes from the student researchers were shared. Next, we present the themes from participant interviews, instructor focus groups, wrap-around supports focus group, student researchers, the interview with the Métis Elder, and the online readiness tools findings.
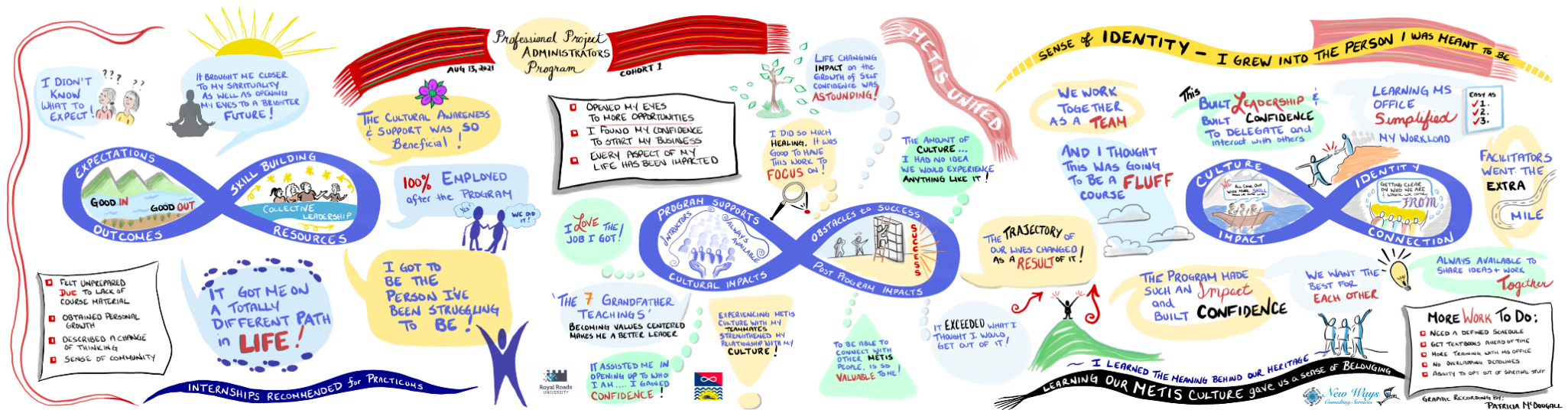
Figure 1.

Celebration of Findings- Cohort 1

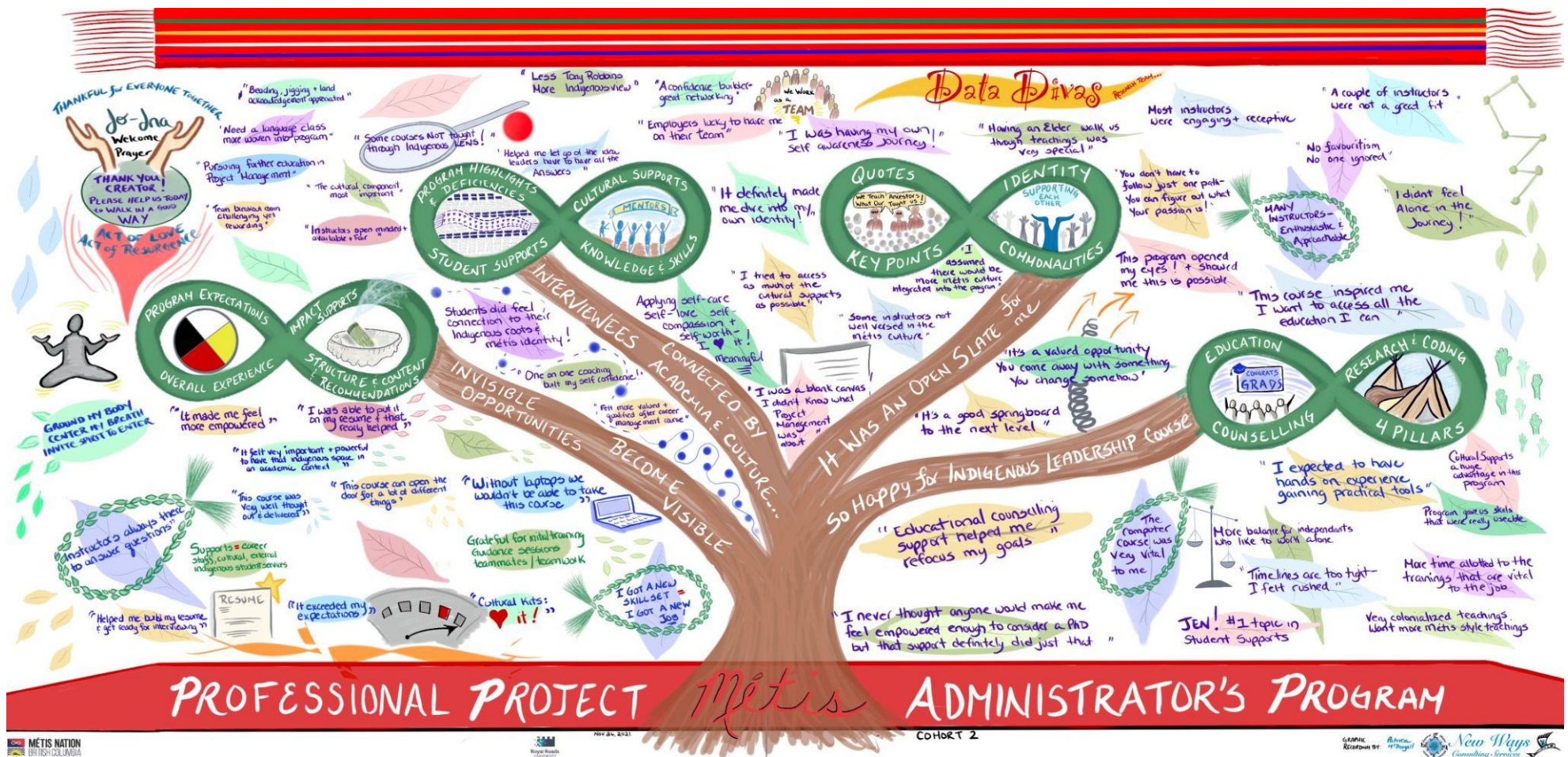**Figure 2.**

Celebration of Findings –Cohort 2

Figure 3.

Celebration of Findings – Cohort 3

Participant Interviews Thematic Analysis

We broke down the primary research question along the following lines of investigation. These are the threads that guided our inquiry and consequent analysis.

- Program
- Student Support
- Cultural Support
- Application of Knowledge and skills
- Confidence and leadership skills
- Teamwork

Based on the interview questions (see Appendix D), there were anticipated themes that emerged across all three cohorts based on the lines of investigation that were established in advance as foci for the interviews. Within the anticipated themes, there were several emergent sub-themes across the three cohort data sets. The main themes are presented below, associated sub-themes are outlined, and a representative quotation from the data is included.

Themes			
Program Expectations	*Overall Impact of the Program*	*Contributors to Success*	
The sub-themes included participants not knowing what to expect to the program exceeding expectations.	The sub-themes developed related to personal, professional, and spiritual viewpoints.	The sub-themes developed included a variety of topics falling under the two general areas.	
No expectations *Uncertain expectations* *Specific expectations:* ~ Métis participants ~ Focus on learning Project Management (PM) and Leadership ~ Prepare participants for the CAPM[1] exam ~ Online learning	~ Self-esteem and confidence ~ Job skills ~ Culture and identity ~ Career progression ~ Sense of community ~ Coaching ~ Online experience	*Supportive community* ~ Administration team ~ Student teams ~ Being present ~ Métis culture woven into program ~ Instructors	*Program Components* ~ Timing of the program ~ Initial program activities ~ Online classroom engagement ~ Scheduling ~ Technology ~ End of course surveys ~ Skills development ~ Career development ~ Flexibility
"I didn't actually have any expectations going into it, I didn't know much about project management ... so it was kind of just an open slate for me going into it." (C2S)	*"You get to practice; I mean there we are with a group of people we've never met and what amazes me is the connection that we got with the cohort fellow students." (C1F)*	*"We got to learn what other people's skill sets were and help encourage them to bring that forward. I never had any sense of competitiveness with my fellow students, we were all on the same page. Practicing equality, wanting the best for each other, wanting the best for the group." (C1V)*	*"I think it was a very beneficial program, just at the right time. Especially with so many of us going through it right in the midst of covid ... I think it was a way of us coming together with our fellow citizens and doing something productive and keeping our skills sharp..."(C1K)*

[1] Certified Associate in Project Management (https://www.pmi.org/certifications/certified-associate-capm)

Themes			
Student Support	*Cultural Support*	*Academic Support*	*Career Support*
The sub-themes developed included the areas listed above. While some participants did not access any of the supports available due to scheduling conflicts, interest, or need, they did comment on the need for them in the program.	The sub-themes developed under cultural support included the impact of the Elder, cultural activities, and participating in a Métis learning community. Some participants mentioned the Collective Leadership course as part of the link to culture.	Sub-themes included relationship with the instructors, and the perceived form and varying degree of instructor support. Some participants mentioned the impact of peers and community support.	Sub-themes included the specific support that students received, actions by specific support staff, and the impact of supports on student confidence.
Types of Supports: ~ Technical ~ Funding ~ Career development ~ Counselling ~ Peer support ~ Administrative ~ Academic ~ Cultural/Elder *Ease of Access and Availability:* ~ Challenges of balancing program work and time to access support ~ Timing of support offered	~ Elder ~ Cultural activities ~ Métis specific cohort/identity ~ Collective leadership course	~ Approachable/caring instructors ~ Types and varying degree of instructor support; facilitator support; and cultural support ~ Community	~ Employment support ~ Coaching impact ~ Timing ~ Explore career possibilities
"I think a lot of it was the instructors that were extremely supportive and the supports that the program provided with Jenn (Online Learning Coordinator) having the computer and tech support and knowing that I felt okay to go to somebody if I	*"I enjoyed that it was a Métis specific cohort and brought that Métis lens to it, I feel like that helped a lot with kind of creating like a safe space, but like also a unique learning environment, you know, because if you're with non-indigenous folks you*	*"The facilitators and the instructors played a huge, huge role in the success of this program... Just everything, everything regarding their job as facilitators and instructors for this program. It was just, it was a little bit of everything, the availability,*	*"The support that I had was incredible like having staff there for assistance and they were available all the time. If I had any questions I could reach out and they were there and they still are, like to still have contact with staff still, was incredible. I was really*

was having a problem, I didn't feel like I was going to be dismissed. I felt that it was a really warm welcoming atmosphere and that extended to this, to my cohort as well." (C3D)	can't bring up the same topics. They don't necessarily understand the same issues that your community tackles and things like that, I really liked that piece about it being a Métis specific cohort. It was kind of nice to have that break and take that space to just like be together in a more special environment and, like a cultural environment and not just like Okay, what are we going to do for this assignment who's doing what tasks, but to be sitting and doing the work or making Bannock..." (C2M)	the openness, the approachability, just all of it! "(C1E)	impressed with the end of the course and having the Career Development weeks like that changed I'll say my life, because it's what got me my job. I am so convinced that having gone through the program it gave me a lot of the missing parts." (C1K)

Themes			
Application of Skills and Knowledge	*Confidence*	*Leadership*	*Teamwork*
The sub-themes developed focused on job-specific skills and their direct application in a work environment, learning how to learn, and the development of broader goals and career paths.	The sub-themes developed focused on increased self-efficacy and understanding of self.	The sub-themes included a focus on both personal and organizational/team leadership.	The sub-themes developed under this theme include a focus on self, relationship with others as well as group process.
~ Learning ~ Finding employment ~ Time management ~ Communication ~ Computer Skills ~ Conflict management ~ Project management ~ Research and data management ~ Collective leadership/ Leadership ~ Intention to further education ~ Applicability of skills ~ Grant proposal writing	~ Increased self-awareness ~ Spirituality/Identity ~ Self-efficacy ~ Taking Risks ~ Developing new perspectives	~ Understanding of Self as a leader ~ Collective Leadership ~ Motivation ~ Agency ~ Opportunities to engage in leadership ~ Cultural Activities	~ Learning about self ~ Appreciating other styles ~ Understanding process and structure ~ Learning about values, workload, and expectations
"So right now, I'm working with a client, a pre-existing client, preparing her year end taxes, and I am making a new Excel spreadsheet pretty much every day to track everything...just my comfort within excel and knowing how to use it and where to use it. I actually have a basis of skills and I actually know how to use it and really have been able to apply that to a lot of stuff in my life". (C3B)	*"[The program] was definitely eye opening. There were a lot of things that I didn't know about myself that I learned. Things that I was scared to do, when conquered, gave me confidence, courage. Brought me closer to my spirituality as well; opening my eyes to a brighter future."*	*"[The program] also gave me the opportunity to know that I could be a leader, and I could also sit back and be part of the team, and yet my thoughts were respected and heard."*	*"It [PPA] was really good for, like, inevitable conflict management...and it was great for just trying to get a better understanding of what kind of communication failures happened that caused people to be in a conflict communication style, to begin with; or just to, like, how to manage people's expectations about what should or shouldn't be happening." (C1J)*

Theme: Future
When looking to the future, the sub-themes that emerged from participants were mostly related to education and employment. Some participants talked about their interest in continuing to learn language and culture.

Education	Employment
~ Trades ~ Project Management; Professional certification ~ Environment (Land stewardship and food preservation) ~ Undergraduate and graduate (business, healthcare, mental health, K-12) ~ Web Development	~ Searching for employment (healthcare, project administration) ~ Progress in current organization ~ Start a new business

"The funny thing about education, because the more you know, the more I want to do… I even pursued looking at what it would be like to get a PhD" (C1F)

"I'm seeking out some future employment endeavors that I'm hoping, this will play a critical role in the success of that" (C3F)

"I can't get enough education. Now something about the program just makes me wanna know anything I can" (C1S)

Theme: Areas of improvement

Some participants noted that no deficiencies came to mind. Other comments fell into three general areas related to communication, academics, and supports.

| *Communication*	*Academic*	*Supports*
~ Managing expectations ~ Clarity regarding the CAPM Certifications	~ Issues due to being the first offering ~ Challenges in teams ~ Workload ~ Facilitators ~ Exam preparation ~ Program Cultural Sensitivity ~ Coaching ~ Set schedules ~ Colonial perspectives ~ Lack of timely access to reading materials ~ Lack of commitment (of peers)	~ Internet connectivity ~ Career Counseling ~ Uncomfortable with spirituality in parts of program ~ Post program follow-up and finding work ~ Time management
"I just think like my expectations weren't really managed going in and I feel like that may have been a result of it being a first round of the program that the administrators didn't really know where it was going to lead" (C1J)	*"Have the instructors, kind of, [be] aware that there might be different learning methods and systems that Indigenous and Métis people might expect coming into this program." (C2C)*	*The lineup of what we were learning. Meaning, some of them [courses] may have been backwards in order to complete some of the other projects … (C3F)*

Instructors' Focus Groups Thematic Analysis

Two focus groups were conducted to record the experiences of faculty members. The first conversation occurred during the delivery of the second cohort of the PPA. The main themes (anticipated) included program design, cultural awareness, student support and online teaching.

Instructor Themes (1st focus group)				
Program Design Structure	**Cultural Awareness**	**Support**	**Online Learning/ Teaching**	**Other**
~ Previous relationships with instructors were an asset/more connection ~ Build community with instructors/ invite to opening ceremonies ~ Differences between cohort 1 and 2 ~ Teamwork working well	~ Support and resources from Indigenous Education Advisor ~ Confusion about the role of the instructor vis a vis culture ~ Positive impact on instructors from being involved in the program ~ Need to move beyond land acknowledgement	~ Availability (of instructors) ~ Bringing in Métis guest speakers ~ Elder and counseling services ~ Provide resources on time (eg. Library access)	~ Issues (attendance, cameras off, trust building, students working full time) ~ Exhaustion online or challenge navigating Learning Management System ~ Changes from 1st to 2nd cohort ~ Bandwidth/ Connectivity issues	~ Perspective of going above and beyond ~ Resources around Indigenization Assignments/ curriculum integration
"You know, I think that that's one thing that came out of the first cohort was the need for us to actually come together more frequently and talk about you know who we are, what we're doing, and what we're, you know, hoping to do with the students, and I think that that really showed. That really	*"Instructors had access to all Indigenous cultural material and workshops – I learned a great deal, and am continuing to observe and understand so I can relate content to the students in a meaningful way that respects their culture and history. I was very impressed with both cohorts'*	*"We need to shout out to the program staff. Those things made a big difference to me. [staff] when you came into my session, and you know were helping me with breakout rooms and polls and stuff like that. I mean just having that level of support freed me up so that I could*	*"For me it's difficult, it's hard to recreate that connectivity [online]. And I know there's not much we can do about it, and we do our best … but there is a bit of a struggle there for me around translating these ways of thinking and being that are very much whole self into just a straight sort of*	*"It's one thing for them [students] to do it [access supports] on top of everything else that they're doing, but how are we weaving that into our curriculum and into our spaces to engage all aspects of being?"*

paid dividends in the second cohort and I'm sure it will even pay higher in the third."	*Capstone projects for the Data Management course; I learned a great deal by listening to their perspectives"*	*better engage the students and you know just knowing that you were there, just made a big difference. You know it's those kinds of supports where you know that somebody's got your back and you're not alone."*	*screen and mental side of things. So, I'll just acknowledge that there's some difficulty for me to do that in an online setting, especially when we're talking about Indigenous teachings."*	

The themes during the second focus group were identified as follows:

Instructor Themes (2nd focus group)			
Program Design Structure	Cultural Awareness	Support	Online Learning/ Teaching
~ Ideas to increase student engagement ~ Ideas to enhance program delivery/ development ~ Issues and suggestions for program	~ Adjust curriculum to cultural differences ~ Nurture cultural awareness ~ Representation	~ Ideas to better serve students ~ What faculty appreciated ~ Support from colleagues ~ Building trust	~ Increase online readiness ~ Challenges and benefits of learning online
"I found through the three cohorts that I am learning to build trust in a different way, and I think that's part of it. And that does require curriculum adjustment as far as I'm concerned. So, I meet my curriculum [goals], but I spend more time trying to find ways that connect me with them."	*"I mean it would have been nice to probably have a little bit more cultural acumen because I think we are in a space where we need to be supporting that identity development."*	*"... there was such a willingness to share content and delivery methods with each other and I think that really created value in order to integrate what other courses were like and what was being delivered and how it was."*	*"And that [cameras off] was challenging because I felt like I didn't get a chance to even know what they looked like throughout the whole program until the very end. So, yeah, that was challenging as a facilitator instructor."*
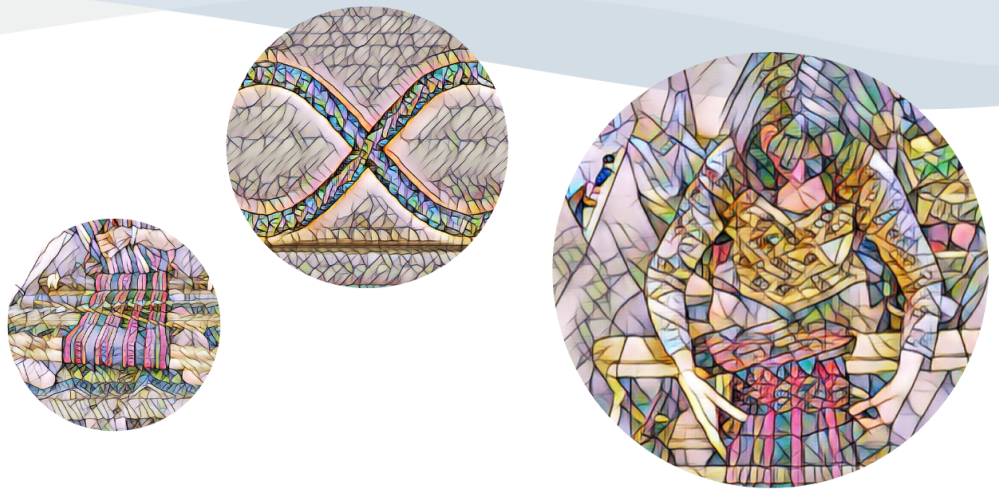
Program Design

In each of the three cohorts, a diversity of education levels, ages, and work experience was noted, sparking a conversation about teaching and student engagement. One instructor expressed the need to have been forearmed with trauma-informed resources. Communicating expectations for students around attendance, teamwork participation, and peer support was commented on by instructors as something that could be improved upon.

Several instructors expressed a strong desire to schedule sessions to learn from each other and collaborate on several themes.

The purpose of these sessions is to:
- Learn from each other
- Evolve their courses
- Connect more about their approach
- Share strategies and tips and support cross-competencies
- Align the skills being taught in one class to be reinforced and built upon in the next
- Share the tools used so those can be used from one class to the next
- Develop more potential for connecting the content and approach between courses
- Discover ways to reinforce concepts and ideas, so they are more relevant to the learner

Additionally, these sessions would explore:
- What they are doing in their classes
- What they are encountering
- How they are dealing with emerging issues
- Find out how it went, what went well, and what we need to change?

One suggestion for operationalizing this collaborative space included setting up a "community of practice" where instructors were free to attend scheduled sessions for collaboration.

Another suggestion was to schedule pre-program and mid-program check-ins.

Cultural Awareness

A developing awareness of Indigenous cultures and how this affects pedagogy was a theme throughout the interviews. Instructors reported making minor adjustments to their courses and delivery as they became more familiar with the culture and delivering a program in 'a good way' with Indigenous students. For instance, in the first cohort, instructors did not necessarily include land acknowledgements in their course, and over the three program deliveries, this became something they added to their classes and delivery.

Overall, the instructors indicated a willingness to form a learning partnership with the students and reported an increased sensitivity to Indigenous culture (an increase in knowledge and understanding was clear in the second focus group). Examples include being mindful of the words they use, even when they are embedded in the profession they are teaching from. They also report asking for feedback if they say anything their students find objectionable, even inviting students to reach out personally to them if they aren't comfortable speaking up in class.

The instructors agreed that the cultural component of a program for Indigenous learners was essential. While acknowledging that students were asking for more cultural elements within the program, some discomfort was expressed about doing that authentically. However, instructors suggested the addition of more guest speakers and role models from the Indigenous community and more culturally relevant projects for students to work on. Having more Indigenous instructors was also seen as a goal to pursue. One instructor wondered how the program could provide more ways for Indigenous instructors to be part of the PPA Program.

Support

Checking in personally with students was noted by several instructors as an important element of their job to make sure these students were getting the support they needed and to build trust as a way of increasing engagement. Personal check-ins were also a means to mitigate the personal discomfort some students might have for speaking up in class or seeking assistance from the instructor.

Instructors appreciated the support administrative staff gave them with the online technology and working with students.

Some of the instructors expressed appreciation for the opportunity to share experiences with each other. This included the chance to get

together virtually or in person, and the willingness of instructors to share their content.

Online Learning and Teaching

Instructors noted that the online aspect of the PPA Program allowed students to participate from wherever they were, in a schedule that suited them by being able to access recordings from class. A few instructors reflected that the online element allowed students to build trust more easily with them. However, another instructor pointed out that building relationships in the face-to-face classroom is easier. In a classroom, the instructor can more easily "read the room" and be more sensitive and intuitive about their course delivery.

Several instructors agreed that one impediment for instructors was that most students had their cameras off during sessions. Suggestions included asking all students to put their cameras on for at least the beginning of each class and giving an extra 5% credit for having cameras on most of the time.

Some instructors voiced concern that students needed more foundation in online learning readiness skills such as navigating the learning management system (Moodle) and working effectively in Zoom.
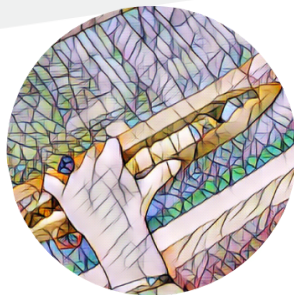
Wrap-Around Support Providers Focus Group Thematic Analysis

Wrap-around Support Providers Themes		
Program Design	**Cultural Component**	**Support**
~ Adjustment through cohorts ~ Challenges	~ Learner identity ~ Varied Cultural awareness	~ Confidence building ~ Impact ~ Insights ~ Timeline
"I had a lot of one-on-one time with the students for mock interviewing and just sort of goal setting for their careers and those relationships continued on to this day, you know I still have a couple of people reaching out. The second cohort and I don't know if it was because it was the summer term or because we did things a little bit differently, they were harder to engage. I got the sense that there was a whole chunk of them that didn't feel that they needed career support, or they had different objectives."	*"So, the quick answer for me would be we come into it as you are the expert in your own life so, whatever your own frame of reference is, your own space. All that is something that you bring or don't bring, and I think some have brought that [Métis culture] into the coaching conversations."*	*"So, it's like you're getting them on a psychological, emotional level as well, preparedness, mental health, you know, overcoming obstacles. It sounds like, if we were to tie this up nicely with a bow, it's like the best steam train ever, right? You've got the academia, you've got the personal coaching to overcome barriers, you've got the career counselling component that Lori and I, where Lori did a lot of, and I was able to do some also, and then you've got that real-world plate. You know so not only are you preparing them but you're also guiding them into doing this now, we can give you some realistic options of putting this into play."*

Student Researcher Thematic Analysis

Student Researcher Themes		
Skills & Confidence	Relational accountability	Other
~ Research skills (listening, interviewing, coding, analyzing) ~ Project/data management ~ Collective leadership ~ Confidence building ~ Perspective taking	~ Caring about the program and peer experiences ~ Giving back ~ Commitment and trust	~ Incentives ~ Job opportunity/including role in resume ~ Taking risks ~ Suggestions
"I think what comes up for me right away is some technical skills …figuring out the different steps about you know, making sure the recording is happening and storing that information properly and …sending it where it needs to go. *I just found it fascinating the coding and the interview skills and just data collection and figuring out and findings and it just was some really neat skills and knowledge that we would not have had."*	*"I think you recognize that there would be this connection between the interviewer and the interviewee that could allow for even a deeper understanding and reflections and just a really great way to keep us engaged past the end and the closing you know.* *Being brought on as an RA, but also by the people that I interviewed I felt really grateful that they trusted enough to be as open as they were even though I had a couple they were both extremely open and giving with their comments and I think that was something that was an indicator that the whole program was a very giving program."*	*"I felt like this was a really awesome employment opportunity to practice that and try that out, and so, as I reflect I feel like how awesome to have been trusted to do that and have been given that opportunity as a student. Because, so I felt that, like a bit of an intern I guess that way and it wasn't just the end of the program that there was this nice continuation."* *"I was confused about the coding. I don't know if it was just me, but I was almost wishing that there was more examples given how to code and maybe from a totally different data collection source or something just so that we can see how you would have come to the different main codes."*

Interview with Métis Elder

On October 7, 2022, Christina Schlattner interviewed Métis Elder Jo-Ina Young. Jo-Ina was the Elder for the first three cohorts of the Professional Project Administrator Program delivered in partnership with Métis Nation BC. The following is a summary of the highlights of that conversation. Jo-Ina was asked to describe her role, what about her role did she most enjoy, and what did she think could be improved? Follow up questions were also asked. Below is the summary of the conversation:

Jo-Ina said she was comfortable with Zoom and thought this might not be the case for many Elders, noting this is something to consider when recruiting an Elder.

> "So, this wasn't something that was uncomfortable for me. And a lot of community Elders and a lot of Elders find this part a little upsetting, unnerving, not quite comfortable."

It was evident to Jo-Ina that the students were "hungry" for cultural teachings.

> "So, at the beginning, I was asked just to do a few presentations and then it just continued to get asked to do more and more and more. And the students were so hungry for it. And that was real obvious. It was obvious that they were hungry. So, what happened then was, "Could you do more? Could you do more?".

Jo-Ina felt the hands-on, experiential nature of the way she taught was important. Rather than only tell stories or teach history or language, Jo-Ina preferred to give an activity to do and speak while students worked on projects.

> "The cultural activities were important for their cultural value but to keep hands busy while talking about things. This helps you learn and remember, and it's the Métis way. And this went over really well."

The cultural element was valuable in raising students' self-esteem around being Métis. It helped them understand they were worthy of the funding they were getting to be in the program. Some students thought if they weren't already strong in their culture, they didn't deserve to take a program for Métis. But when they would learn about and begin to identify with their culture, they began to conclude they were worthy.

> "The difference is the confidence they had I think because it's a Métis funded course, right, so there's always that guilt. *Do I deserve to be taking this money?* If I don't know much about my Métis culture."

Jo-Ina said she would like to see culture woven into all the courses, not just included as a side element of the program.

> "I personally wish they would bring culture in and not just make the culture on the side but put culture into whatever they're teaching at that time. Because it just brings the students together with something that they all have in common."

Jo-Ina thought that shared culture was responsible in part for the high rate of retention among students. Students were able to lean on each other when they were under pressure. They had a sense of belonging to something and this supported them throughout.

> "I'm just connecting the dots and all the things that probably contributed to the pace of the high retention rate because you've got that sense of belonging, you know, that can really lift and keep you moving forward, even when you're struggling and feeling down. That's important."

One of the most satisfying aspects of the cultural teachings for Jo-Ina was how it gave many students the desire to work within the Métis culture. This is important to Jo-Ina because graduates will continue to belong to a community that will support them.

"Because we see communities just support you all the time, your community. And when you go out every time on your journey, if you're out there by yourself, you might ask, "Am I going to fall?" Community is always there to help you back up. Not everyone gets this."

When asked if she could suggest any improvements or changes, Jo-Ina said she thought it was important for students to have a regular time when she was available, even if no cultural activity was planned for a given week. She thinks this is important so students can come and finish the previous activity or talk to the Elder about anything.

"But I would have liked to have had it more regularly. So that if you couldn't make one week you knew you knew there was another one coming up every two weeks or so rather than just this week."

Jo-Ina's reasons for keeping and expanding the role of the Elder in the PPA Program are compelling. Some of her insights and recommendations are summarized below.

- Ensure future Elders are comfortable with Zoom technology. (Additional training may be required.)
- Consider a regular weekly session with the Elder, regardless of cultural activity.
- Continue to include handwork cultural projects during the cultural sessions.
- Include more Indigenous learning in all the PPA classes. (Could include looking for specifically Indigenous organizations for the Capstone Projects.)
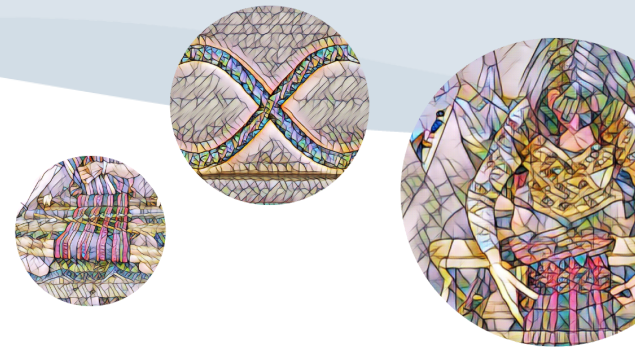
Online Readiness Tools Findings – DCP, FOLCS, & ORTS

Context for the online readiness tools

The overarching aim of the Global Educational Learning Observatory (GELO) project is to have data-driven and scientifically informed evidence that contributes to the evolving best practices for online learning and readiness for online learning. The profiles generated by each tool are produced as visualizations that can be used to determine readiness for online learning and for career planning with respect to digital technology use (EiLAB, n.d.).

To support the ongoing work of the GELO project, a component of the Project Connect research involved participants completing the online readiness tools for their own understanding, and to inform and (i) refine existing online readiness tools to incorporate Indigenous world views and obtain feedback from vulnerable, remote, and marginalized populations; (ii) construct the necessary tools to extend into the cultural dimensions associated with online readiness. Using the Digital Competency Profiler (DCP) tool, the Fully Online Learning Community Survey (FOLCS), participants were provided with an opportunity to identify and consider the digital skills needed for success in online learning environments. Participants can revisit and update their resulting individual profile at any time, and the tools used to create it are openly accessed.

Online Readiness Tool DCP – Findings

The amalgamated data set for the Digital Competency Profiler (DCP) responses for the Project Connect participants (N=4) who completed this tool is displayed in Appendix E.

Online Readiness Tool FOLCS Findings

Due to the limited response rate (N=3), an amalgamated profile could not be created for the FOLCS for this data collection round.

Online Readiness Tool ORTS Findings

From the three respondents, the findings from the narrative responses in the ORTS fell across four main areas: (1) ease of use; (2) Indigenous alignment; (3) usefulness of results; and (4) suggestions for improvement. For each of these areas, examples from the data are provided.

Ease of use

"They were easy enough questions although some were not as relevant to my current situation, being finished my program and in my day to day life some are not used. Some questions were a grey area as I do not download movies or music, … nor do I own Apple products. But I am confident if I did, I would be fairly comfortable navigating."

"Fairly straightforward and easy to navigate. I appreciate that upon completion it provides lots of information regarding what each dimension means and why they are important."

Improvements suggested included:

- Have all questions on one page instead of on separate pages
- Better align questions with answer options
- Link each dimension with their respective questions to allow for comparison

- Provide examples of each parameter

Indigenous alignment

"I think that Indigenous knowledge could provide an interesting perspective on online instruments. Indigenous values differ from traditional western values so I would be interested to hear that perspective in relation to what is important in social spaces and what is not."

Usefulness of results

"The first thing I did upon completion was look for which field I scored highest in. This allowed me to gain a better understanding of my strengths and areas in which I excel. Overall, the study stated that I am a collaborative learner with strong social competency. I then looked upon my weaknesses and realized I need to work on my social presence and epistemological competence. As I read further, I agree with this diagnosis and hope to work on these areas in the future."

Suggestions for improvement

"Possibly include more information regarding how to improve in certain areas and why it is important to. This will likely encourage individuals to look internally and improve upon their capabilities."

"It was an interesting series of questions about all the various ways/means technology enables us to locate, organize and use information. Being asked these questions reminded me about how much we take for granted the ease and speed with which we access the knowledge of the world to support our personal and professional lives."
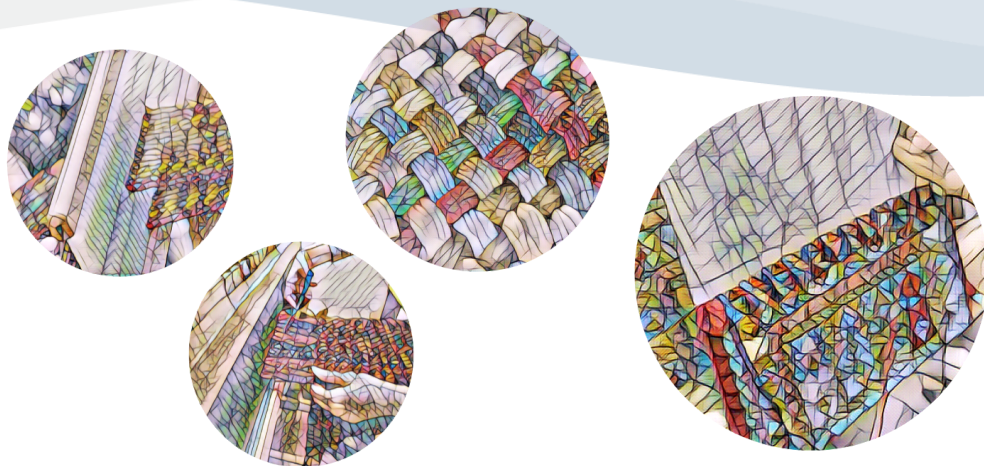
Discussion

Completing such a comprehensive research project has provided us with extensive data on the various program components. The action research approach we followed enabled our team to learn, to reflect, and to make changes based on graduates' experiences. The research findings have proven useful in preparing for new cohorts of the PPA Program in partnership with other Indigenous communities.

In this section, we discuss the way we interpret the research findings to explore the research question. We also explore the interconnected elements that are key in program design. Most importantly, we ask the question *now what*? The PCS team has funding for another three deliveries of the PPA program in partnership with Indigenous communities (First Nations in BC, and Métis Nation of Alberta). Although these partnerships enable us to deliver skills to more students, we also wish to advocate for additional avenues for learners to pursue higher education. Therefore, we hope the research results captured in this report support the case for the development of a bridging program for Indigenous learners where credit courses – such as those included in the PPA program – can act as a pathway into diploma and degree programs for these learners.

For the first part of this discussion, we focus on answering the research question: **what is the experience of Project Connect graduates and partners, and how does the experience impact them during and beyond program completion?**

We acknowledge that each individual experience in the program was unique. We also noticed the patterns of the journey that each cohort took. This experience is best captured in the graphic recordings. The metaphors that student researchers chose provide insight into their experience: climbing a mountain, going on a canoe, following a road, the learning journey represented as the branches of a tree. The woven elements of program design described above guided the process of change, movement, and growth.

The experience of students goes beyond simply acquiring skills. As a job readiness program, the PPA findings show that participants learned a variety of skills that are relevant to project administration and the job market in general. However, we were also pleasantly surprised by the impact that the PPA Program had on building learners' confidence.

The research findings include elements that have been identified and correlated with leadership efficacy in previous research. For instance, Komives et al. (2006) describe the process in which students develop a leadership identity over time through a developmental process. The grounded theory that supports this model proposes that many variables, such as peers, mentors, group experiences, or self-awareness, determine the development of the leadership identity.

Another way to interpret the perceived increase in confidence is through what Starblanket (2018) describes as Indigenous resurgence, the awakening towards the revitalization of Indigenous ways. Or perhaps through Voyageur et. al.'s (2014) idea of *restorying* or telling a new story, envisioning the potential of Indigenous communities. Learners felt at ease with the Elder and with each other, they openly embraced their identity as Métis, learning from each other, practicing the language, feeling proud of their heritage, creating projects that related to their culture in some way or another.

To frame the second part of this discussion, we focus on four main areas that capture the relationships among the various program elements that we believe were essential for the successful implementation of the PPA and may provide useful lessons for other programs. These elements are in alignment with previous distance education research for Indigenous learners (Cochrane and Maposa, 2009; Walton et al., 2020). However, our approach is one of interconnectedness and relationships (Goodchild, 2021). We believe that one element alone will not be as impactful – all threads need to be woven together for these types of programs to succeed. With this relational lens on, we conclude that meaningful relationships, relevant and applicable content, cultural learning, and investment in wrap-around supports were woven together to provide a life-changing experience for learners.

The Woven Elements of Program Design

Caring Community

Wrap-around Supports

Relevant Knowledge/Skills

Cultural Learning
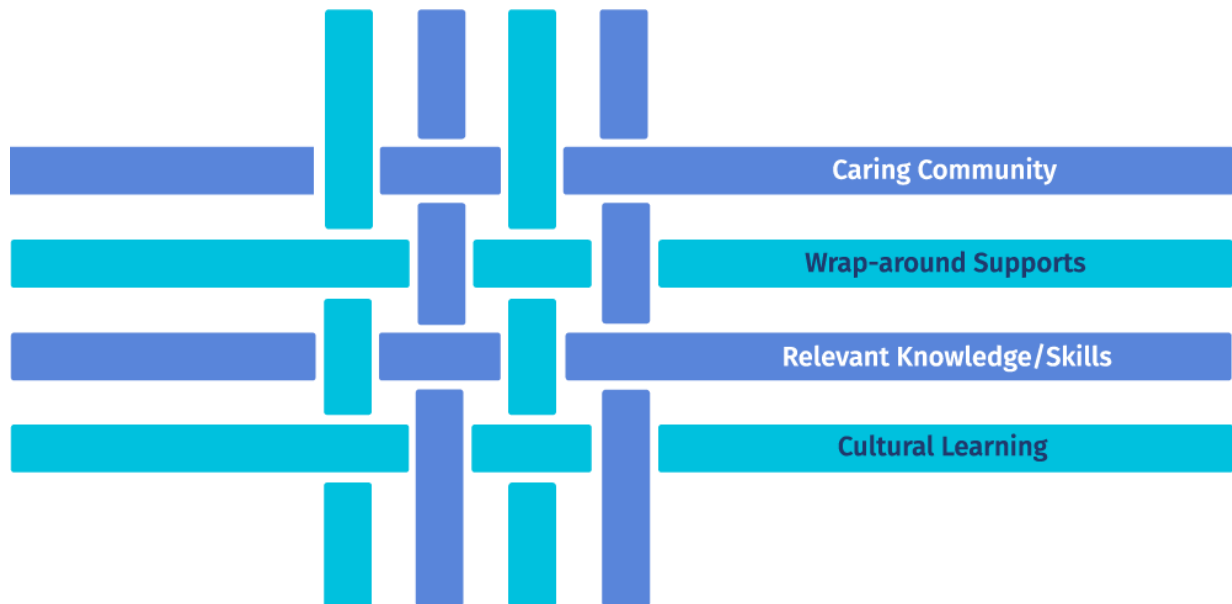
Love is at the centre of this work. Many scholars (Brooks, 2017; Dominguez, 2019; Freire, 1973); have explored the intersections between love and education, particularly with a focus on critical pedagogy. According to hooks (2001), "when we work with love, we renew the spirit; that renewal is an act of self-love, it nurtures our growth. It's not what you do but how you do it" (p. 65).

From the beginning of the PPA, program staff went above and beyond to provide a caring space and to support students. During the research interviews, graduates mentioned the people that had made an impact, the same names over and over. Similarly, the majority spoke about the openness and care of the instructors. This supportive and caring behaviour matters and establishes a culture

where trusting relationships among program staff, students, and instructors can occur.

Cultural learning has been an essential element for the learning community and the avenue for many students to build community, and to find and strengthen their identity. Many students engaged their kids in the sessions, expanding the impact of the program to a larger community. Having the program online allows for these interactions to occur.

We advocate for a relational, collectivistic, and intergenerational approach to program design, particularly in an online delivery. This approach acknowledges that students are not alone in their learning; many have their families around them. Therefore, the impact goes beyond the registered student. Similarly, the awareness of

local community issues is necessary for meaningful learning, relationship building, and relevant and applicable knowledge.

Intercultural learning must be both the basis and the outcome of the work. We are no longer in an era where instructors bring the knowledge and students bring the culture. Partners in education have plenty of opportunities to learn and to reflect on inclusive practices and to bring their own cultural learnings and identity to the forefront. There are many opportunities for learning about Indigenous approaches to knowing and being, starting with the BC Campus Indigenization Guides or University of Alberta's *Indigenous Canada course*. Another resource worth noting is the Intercultural Teaching Competences (ITC) framework (Dimitrov & Haque, 2016) which is a tool educators and curriculum designers can use to incorporate intercultural teaching competence in the backbone of their work.

Wrap-around supports included in the program supported access, contributed to student engagement, and boosted confidence. Many graduates spoke about how important the funding was that enabled living allowances and access to a computer they retained when successfully completing the program. There was a sense of reciprocity that contributed to the commitment many students felt to keep going.

Dedicated wrap-around supports and staff provided the support that students needed to feel confident making meaning of their learning. The career development and coaching sessions had a strength-based approach and were, for the most part, rooted in experiential learning. Learners had the opportunity to do mock interviews and role-plays, to explore new possibilities, to change their narrative. This embodied learning has been shown to make an impact (Anumudu, 2017; Diamond, 2007; Etmanski, 2007).

Being able to apply the skills right away, for instance those related to MS Office, seemed to be important for students. Additionally, having a coach who helped learners articulate their new learning in ways that allowed them to progress boosted learners' confidence when sending job applications or being interviewed. This finding is supported by Loewen et al. (2017) who advocate for the curriculum to include cultural appropriateness and academic relevance.

Relevant and applicable knowledge goes beyond the specific skills that students learned, it also encompasses the knowledge about self and ways of knowing. This component is more than the program design learning outcomes, it speaks to a culture of learning (Senge, 2000) and the openness to listen, to reflect, to learn, and to keep humble.

The Spirit Bead

The Elder taught us about the spirit bead, the bead of the wrong colour intentionally placed as an act of humility. For the team, it is a reminder that we have a lot to learn and to unlearn. The following recommendations provide insight into, potentially, a more effective way to design and deliver future programming.

Program Delivery

- Continue to provide online access/delivery to foster connection and enable wider participation in the program.
- Ensure a high level of engagement of instructor-facilitated interaction in support of student engagement and learning.
- Remove overlapping course content and activities.
- Reduce number of program activities (backend-heavy courses)
- Consider developing a process for "challenging" program components based on work experience. For example, a few students had stronger MS Office skills and didn't require the same level of training in software use.
- Communicate clear expectations before enrollment, especially regarding the commitment and workload.

- Develop a process to audit a course and an entry pathway into the program for courses that have been audited.
- Provide options for changing types of activities to meet the requirements of relevance, access, and cultural awareness.
- Provide advanced access to resources. For example, timely access to the library or reading materials.
- Develop and clearly communicate a pathway from this program to academic certification for students who complete this work and want to continue with academic studies.
- Continue our work on advocating for access to programs by students who follow less typical pathways to post-secondary education.
- Ensure that student supports continue to be incorporated into programming by demonstrating how these supports lead to student success.

Cultural Learning

- Increased representation from Indigenous facilitators/instructors.
- Continue to include cultural identity related activities and resources in the program, considering conscientization perspectives. For example, anti-racism education, Indigenization, and decolonization in education.

- Provide Indigenous cultural training for the instructors.
- Build support for a smooth transition between cultural and academic experiences in the program.

Research

- Continue to conduct research on the program, specifically around the cultural component.
- Continue to support students as researchers and provide further training on interviewing, coding, and data analysis.
- Provide more debriefing on the interviewing process to allow the student researchers to examine the intersection between different ways of knowing (e.g. ways in which they have been trained as part of the PC research project)
- Provide sufficient time for data collection after completion of the program.
- Introduce and explain the benefit of the Online Readiness Tools.
- Integrate the Online Readiness Tools into a course.

Conclusion

"We have to believe that what is good for Indigenous students is good for all students, that what is good for Indigenous people is good for all society. Therefore, the changes that emerge from a constructive collaboration whose aim is to impact Indigenous education positively will benefit education and humanity as a whole." (Ottman, 2017, p. 112).

Shakamohta is the Michif word for 'connect'. It was also the name for the learning hub that welcomed Métis students from across BC to the e-learning platform for Project Connect and the Professional Project Administrator (PPA) program, a combination of credit and non-credit courses. The extensive student supports included in the program facilitated student success within the program and post-graduation.

Based on both the graduation rate and the research findings, the PPA program has been a success: for the three deliveries in its pilot stage the PPA program had a completion rate of nearly 98% with most graduates finding employment where they can apply their newly acquired skills. The PPA was also innovative. The program helped build connections, not just externally, but also connections between students, with Métis culture, and to career supports, all with the goal of delivering a life changing experience for students. This innovative blend of applied learning, where students gain hard and soft skills, while building self-efficacy and strengthening their connection to their culture holds useful lessons for other career-focused programs serving Indigenous students.

The success of Project Connect depended on several factors, including creating strong relationships, the partnerships formed to support the program, and the varied team of actors involved in its creation and delivery. With our partners we made the decision that Métis culture would be included in the program in the hope that students would see their communities reflected in the program. No one associated with the program foresaw the deepened connection to community that would result or the critical role it played in program success. Another factor was the multifaceted approach to student support, extending well beyond graduation.

These research findings are currently contributing to enhancements for the next iteration of the PPA program (2022- 2023). We will continue supporting learners as they work to attain their personal and employment goals.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Project Connect Administration

Appendix B: Project Connect Research Work Plan/ PPA Phase 1

Activity	Timeline	Who?
Proposal writing	by April 30, 2021	Lead Researchers/Program Staff
Recruitment of researchers	by April 15, 2021	Lead Researcher
Approval from AVP	by end of April 2021	Lead Researcher
Submit ethics review proposal	By early May 2021 (4 – 6 weeks for ethics approval (target approval for end of May)	Lead Researcher
Training – for Cohort 1 RA's	April & May 2021	Lead Researchers
Coming together as a research team	May 28, 2021	Research Team/ Elder/Indigenous Coordinator
COHORT 1		
1st round of data collection/ Program from Nov 2020 to February 26, 2021	Cohort 1 interviews June-July 2021	Cohort 1 RA's
Celebration of Findings, Cohort 1	August 13	ALL
Data analysis Data sources: Cohort 1 end of program interview Cohort 1 online readiness tools	August 2021	Cohort 1 RA's + Lead Researchers
End of Cohort 1 RA interview	End September 2021	Cohort 1 RA's
Focus Group with Support Staff	August 2021	Lead Researcher/Program Staff
Coding of Data Cohort 1	September-November	Lead Researchers
COHORT 2		
Activity	Timeline	Who?

Training – for Cohort 2 RA's	September/October 2021	Research Lead & Cohort 1 RA's
2nd round of data collection/ Program from April 12 to August 20, 2021	September- December 2021 Cohort 2 interview September 2021	Cohort 2 RA's and Researchers
Coding training	October 29 tentative	Lead Researcher and cohort1 RA's
Data analysis (RA and researchers) Data sources: Cohort 2 end of program interview Cohort 2 online readiness tools	October – Nov 2021	Cohort 2 RA's and Researchers
Celebration of Findings, Cohort 2	November 26th	All
COHORT 3		
Training – for Cohort 3 RA's	January 2022	Lead Researcher and RA's interested
3rd round of data collection/ Program from September 13 to January 21, 2022	February/March 2022	Cohort 3 RA's and Lead Researchers
Data analysis (RA and researchers) Data sources: Cohort 3 end of program interview Cohort 3 online readiness tools	Feb – Mar 2022	Cohort 3 RA's and Lead Researchers
End of Cohort 3 RA interview	End Feb 2022	Research team
Celebration of Findings, Cohort 3	March 25, 2022	All
Focus group, RA's	April 4, 2022	Program staff
Focus group, instructors	April 7, 2022	Program staff
Submission of preliminary findings report to PCS, Elder, and RA's	April 30, 2022	Lead Researchers to all RA's
Writing of Final Report	Summer/Fall 2022	All
Interview with Elder	October, 2022	Program staff

Appendix C: Themes

Themes
Program Expectations
Overall Impact of the Program
Contributors to Success
Student Support
Cultural Support
Academic Support
Career Support
Application of Skills and Knowledge
Confidence
Leadership
Teamwork
Future
Areas of improvement

Appendix D: Interview Questions

Thank you very much for taking time to be part of this interview. As you know, we are assessing the impact of the **Professional Administrative** program on recent graduates. We will have a conversation for about 45-60 minutes, as you know it will be recorded and at any time during the interview you can request to stop. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Mention that it might feel repetitive and at times you will go back to something you had already said. Confirm emotions with the participant. How are you feeling as you say this/ as you remember this moment.

Focus = Overall impact
a. Describe your overall experience in this program?
b. Describe expectations when you came in. How were they similar/different when you graduated?

Focus = Program
a. What are the key contributors to the success of this program from your perspective?
b. What are the deficiencies of this program from your perspective?
c. What would you have liked to see added or subtracted from the program? Any suggestions?

Focus = Student Support
a. What supports were there for you – throughout the program?
b. Can you describe when you accessed the support? What supports did you use? Why? And Why not? What didn't you access, and why? What impact did the supports you accessed have?
c. What was your comfort level approaching your instructors? Did you feel there was approachability? Describe
d. Experiences (Positive/Negative) with Instructors, (keep this anonymous please)?

Focus = Cultural Support
a. What supports/events were there for you throughout the program?

    b. Did you access these supports/events? Why? Why not?

    c. What impact did the ones you attended have on you personally?

Focus = Application of knowledge/skills

    a. What skills did you learn in this program? How were you/have been able to apply the skills that you gained in the program?

    b. Did you find fulfilling employment following this program?

    c. Did you seek promotions or other positions/opportunities as a result of the PPA Program?

    d. Did you feel inspired to seek further education or other professional opportunities?

Focus = Personal Mastery/self and leadership efficacy/Teamwork

    a. Did this program build your confidence and/or leadership skills and if so, how? How did the program impact your confidence to pursue something you wanted to do in any area of your life?

    b. Can you describe your experiences with working in teams? (within the program)

Would you be compelled to recommend this program to others? Yes or no, and please explain that decision. (Were there times when you felt you were unable to complete the program? What made you persevere?)

Anything else that you would like to add or that you feel we should have asked?

If there is anything else that comes to mind or anything else you would like to add please do not hesitate to email us. Thank you for taking the time to be a part of this interview process.

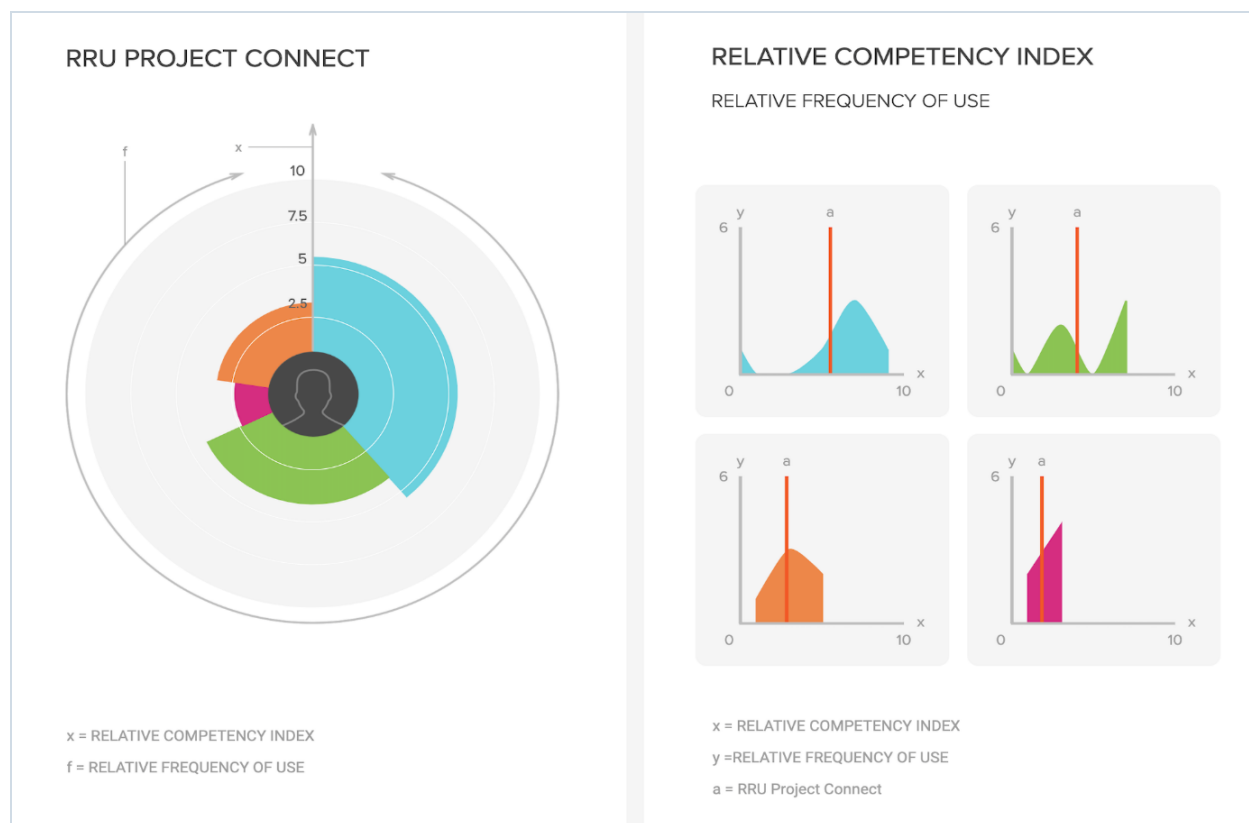# Appendix E: Amalgamated data set for DCP for all 3 PPA cohorts (N = 4).

Figure 4: Amalgamated data set for DCP for all 3 PPA cohorts (N = 4).

Our Team

Jo Axe

Jo is the Program Head for the Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies program. Jo's research has focused on learning community development, open practice, and supportive employment programs for vulnerable youth. In 2013, she became the founding director of the School of Education and Technology at RRU.

Tim Brigham

Taanishi everyone! I'm a proud father of four amazing young women and grateful to live on the territory of the Cowichan people. I am also the Project Lead for the PPA program / Project Connect – a program that has exceeded my hopes in its impact on our graduates' lives and career goals. I feel fortunate to work with a dedicated group of graduates and experienced researchers in the Natoonikew Aansaamb (searching together) research team. The research shows the project has truly lived up to its title by not only connecting students to useful skills but also through connecting or re-connecting many students with their culture. I'm excited to be part of telling the story of this project which I believe has important lessons for other online programs focused on meeting the needs of Indigenous students.

Elizabeth Childs

Elizabeth Childs is interested in the design, creation and implementation of flexible learning environments that incorporate the affordances of information and communication technology (ICT) and provide learners with increased choice, flexibility and opportunities for co-creation. With expertise in educational technology & instructional design, design thinking, open education and online learning, her research interests include open educational practices and pedagogies; creation of online communities and digital habitats; design thinking and models for immersive professional development.

Valeria Cortés

It is such a privilege to be in relationship to this wonderful research team! Through co-teaching Collective Leadership in the PPA Program and engaging in this research project, I have learned so much about Métis Culture and Indigenous ways of knowing and being; as a result, I experienced a resurgence in interest and love for my Mexican culture, languages, and origin. As a mother, preserving and celebrating culture is a priority; as an educator, I strive for creating spaces that allow us to learn from each other, feel connected, and take action to enhance our communities.

Sheena Desjarlais

Hello, my name is Sheena Desjarlais. I am currently a full-time student at the College of the Rockies in my third year in the Bachelor of Business Administration program, as well as a full-time College of the Rockies employee as a Coordinator for the ECE Training Wage and Wage Subsidy Programs.

I was born and raised in a small Métis community in northern Saskatchewan and moved to BC for the experience. Moving to BC and getting involved in the Métis communities was a different experience. Métis people in BC are looking for Métis culture and a sense of belonging. When I saw that Royal Roads was offering a PPA program specific to Métis people, I could not pass up the opportunity. Education and Métis culture are two very important things in my life so when they were being offered together, I immediately took advantage of the offer. Royal Roads University did an excellent job showcasing Métis history and culture while helping Métis citizens by educating us for future employment.

I was also given the opportunity to work as a Research Assistant for the PPA program which allowed me to gather information and analyze data about the PPA program from previous students. I love how Royal Roads is committed to making the PPA Program even better!

Jacqueline Edmand

Taanshi!

I'm Jacqueline or Jackie for short! I currently reside on the unceded territories of the Coast Salish peoples and the Sna'naw'as First Nation. I am a proud member of The Painted Feather Woodland Métis community in Ontario. I hold two recent certifications from Royal Roads University – Professional Project Administration Certification Program and Jelly Academy-Digital Marketing, in which both have distinguished commitment to Indigenous learning and academia. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to participate as a research assistant with Project Connect. This experience has been uplifting educationally and personally in how I perceive this colonized landscape through an Indigenous woman's lens. I feel empowered to continue the fight for our voices to be heard and our heritage to be preserved. This passion has led me to dedicate myself to lifelong learning and employment in the non-profit sector.

Suzanne Fiddler

Hello, my name is Suzanne Fiddler. I was one of the participants who took the first PPA Program through Royal Roads University as well as one of the first research assistants to follow up on the program's success. For me as a Métis person this program gave me the courage to come out of my shell and be proud of who I am and of the contributions I can give to the community. I was very proud and honoured that I was able to not only take this program but to do the initial research project also, as it showed that I was not the only one who took something away from the program that not only changed my life but also gave me the courage to reach out and be proud to be Métis.

Gaileen Flaman

"Taanshi kiya" is one way newly self-employed Métis mother of two, Gaileen ("Gai" is okay, but never "Gail") Flaman might greet you. Thrilled to have been invited to participate as an interviewer, data collector, and coder, Gaileen enjoyed the experience of weaving together students' feedback and comments into a meaningful story meant to acknowledge, inform, and celebrate the impact of the PPA program. She is most grateful for the opportunity to make visible the Métis student's experiences and contribute to a new chapter in education that elevates and uplifts Indigenous people.

Tracy Franklin

My name is Tracy Franklin, I am a proud Métis woman and Royal Roads Alumni. As a research assistant for Project Connect, I had the pleasure of gathering data from the 3rd Cohort of the Professional Project Administrator Program, my peers. My experience from not only an educational aspect of the PPA program but from the connection, on a deeper level, to the Métis culture has impacted me in such a positive way. During a time when I was experiencing a devastating loss and sense of disconnect, the program, my peers, and all the educational and cultural connections healed a part of my soul and filled a space that needed to be filled. Jo-Ina was key in my journey as the cultural connection was unexpected, and for me, was much needed. My contributions to Project Connect, interviewing, coding, and gathering data from my peers will allow others to benefit from our journey and encourage the connection of our Métis community members through the shared experience of learning in such a unique and dynamic program. I am grateful to have been given the opportunity to take part in the program as well as give back through exploring the research assistant opportunity.

Shannon Kingdon

Taanishi!

My name is Shannon Kingdon, I am a proud mother and Thompson Okanagan Métis-Cree. In addition to being one of the participants in the first Professional Project Administrator Program through Royal Roads University, I was also one of the research assistants who had the privilege to assist in following up on the program's success with the other graduates. I am grateful for the opportunity and experiences gained through both; the cultural acceptance allowed me to further my knowledge while connecting with like-minded individuals that had such a positive impact on my life!

Maarsi!

Valerie Kuilboer

Taanishi, my name is Valerie Kuilboer, I am a 61-year-old widowed Métis woman from the Red River Valley of Manitoba. I have two adult daughters and five grandchildren.

My background was originally in nursing until I had the privilege of working in the field of Addiction and Mental health for over twenty-plus years. I have had the privilege of attending RRU to complete a master's in leadership and recently completed the PPA

program. I was fortunate to be given the opportunity to be part of the RRU research team. I am so grateful to be involved in a research study that is working towards enriching the lives of other Métis individuals as it has enriched mine. Being a part of programs that teach people about culture and heritage that, for so many of us, has been a missing piece towards wholeness, has been an amazing opportunity. I am looking forward to continuing this journey.

Kelly Loffler

Taanishi, my name is Kelly. I reside in Winnipeg, Manitoba on Treaty 1 Territory, the lands of the Anishinaabe (Ojibway), Ininew (Cree), Oji-Cree, Dene, and Dakota ancestors and families, and the birthplace of the Métis Nation. I am a citizen of the Métis Nation British Columbia and the Manitoba Métis Federation.

In my role as Online Learning Coordinator for the Professional Project Administrator (PPA) program, I am privileged to support the Indigenous students enrolled in the program, the instructors that facilitate the courses, and the PPA team. I was a student myself in the PPA program when I began my Royal Roads journey in 2020 then continued as a research assistant on the Project Connect research project where

we explore the impacts of the PPA program on those involved with it to continually enhance the program for future cohorts.

I am incredibly proud to be a part of the good work Professional and Continuing Studies at Royal Roads University is doing in both the PPA program and the Project Connect research. Maarsii!

Aimee Rawson

Hello, my name is Aimee Rawson. I am a proud Métis woman, born in Winnipeg where I had the opportunity to experience the culture and raised in BC where I felt like I lost it. As a recent graduate of the PPA program, I am grateful for the skills this program offers, along with the opportunity to connect to our Métis roots.
I am honoured to have been selected as a Research Assistant for Project Connect, where I interviewed, transcribed, and coded the experiences of my peers. Thank you to the interviewees for sharing their stories, I then had the opportunity to weave together these stories to gain an understanding of the impacts of the PPA Program. I am grateful to have attended such a thoughtful program and hope our research allows for more programs aimed at empowering the Métis people.

Sheila Rea

Sheila is a Métis with family roots in Batoche, Saskatchewan. First known family name; La Vallee. Sheila spent most of her childhood in Alberta where her extended family farmed north of Westlock. She moved to BC and has spent her adult years in various places, and now resides in Nanaimo on Vancouver Island. She is a mother and wife with deep love and gratitude for her family.

Sheila is proud of her past work experience as a project coordinator and manager in the Advertising industry in Vancouver, and as an owner/operator of an Espresso Bar and Bistro in Salmon Arm. After taking time off from work to devote to her family, Sheila has recently graduated from the Professional Project Administration program at RRU. She has learned new skills for project management including a newfound appreciation of her Métis culture and Indigenous ways of organizing society through Collective Leadership. Sheila has been a political activist for the past few years and is excited to promote collective leadership, and the values of collective intelligence in politics, organizations, and community.

Janey Rowland

Taanishi Janey Rowland dishinihkaashoon! Hello, my name is Janey Rowland! I am a small business owner, a practitioner of herbology, and a recent graduate of the Professional Project Administration Certification Program. As a Métis individual, on their own journey of cultural reconnection and personal exploration, it has been a truly unique and rewarding experience being a member of this wonderful team of people with Project Connect and Royal Roads University.

My time within both the program and further still as a research assistant has opened my eyes more completely to the interconnectedness of not only who we are but what we can achieve when we advocate for change and development. I am proud to say I have been a small part of the important work being done here.

Empowered with both the experiences and the knowledge I have gained over this last year, I am committed to furthering my education into the area of non-profit management, assisting other organizations to continue their good work within the global community.

Christina Schlattner

Hello! I gratefully reside and have raised a son on the traditional lands of the T'Souke First Nation. As a Learning and Development Advisor, I am honoured to collaborate with this team including the Indigenous students. Together we weave traditional Indigenous ways of learning and knowing into a program that helps participants create a fulfilling and sustainable future.

My background is transformative learning for adults. I have worked in program development, facilitation, evaluation, and communication. I had the wonderful experience of working with and learning from Nuu-chah-nulth people, who taught me how to listen with an open heart.

Jo-Ina Young

Taanishi. It is an honour to participate as an Elder in the PPA Program, and my privilege to have been given the opportunity to share Métis Culture with the students and staff. Because of this, I have also been challenged to continue my own education in ancestral Métis knowledge. To have experienced the students' growth through the addition of Indigenized teaching was not only rewarding but trailblazing. It is my hope that every post-secondary institution includes and expands awareness of our Métis Culture.

Patricia McDougall

As an aboriginal graphic recorder (Klahoose Nation on Cortes Island), Patricia draws upon her sensitivity to culture and tradition when working with diverse groups to embody mutual and respectful collaboration. Patricia is passionate about weaving relationships and story into her graphic recordings so teams can use these powerful graphic tools for planning and decision-making.