

**DECHINTA CENTRE FOR RESEARCH AND LEARNING: STANDING COMMITTEE
ON INDIGENOUS AND NORTHERN AFFAIRS HOUSE OF COMMONS OF CANADA
SUBMISSION**

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Submitted by: Kelsey Wrightson, Executive Director of Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning

Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning (Dechinta) welcomes the opportunity to provide supplementary comments following our presentation to the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs and to reemphasize how stable, predictable and multi-year funding in Indigenous-led educational institutions can improve graduation rates and successful outcomes for Indigenous students. Specifically, the submission will detail the results of Canada's investment in Dechinta programs and the impact on Northern and Arctic Indigenous communities.

While empirical data speaks volumes about the results we've achieved by reinvesting directly in Northern and Arctic communities, it is the impact on Indigenous learners in those communities that motivates and drives the team at Dechinta to partner with and to reach even more communities. In her own words, Bertha Drygeese, Yellowknives Dene First Nation Member and Dechinta Alumni, wrote: *"The first sights of the self-governance community built by Dechinta brought me back to four decades ago, when I felt the cold, crisp air on my face. It felt like a dream which I could finally wake up to. I felt sure of myself after practising my culture and tradition once again. It all came clear to me. I am home. I am here on my homeland... I came back to myself, my land and my people. Techniques and handling fish almost immediately came natural to me. I thought to myself, maybe I was not lost, just disconnected."*

Dechinta acts as a bridge to connect traditional education models and Western ones. Because, like Bertha Drygeese noted, these programs help people wake to the possibility that they can live and learn according to the social, economic and cultural fabric of their nations. It awakens possibilities for Northern and Arctic Indigenous economic reconciliation and educational reconciliation, building stronger communities into the future.

Dechinta does not try to Indigenize curricula and programs. They are inherently Indigenous. Elders and Knowledge Keepers are not invited as special guests for course delivery—they are an integral part of the cocreation of curricula, they co-deliver the programs and, they are paid a salary commensurate to their contributions and experience. For our students, Dechinta ensures that the knowledge they acquire is recognized by Western institutions so that they can approach post-secondary education from a position of strength. Too often, models to increase greater access for Indigenous students to post-secondary education focus on transitions, on remediation or on alternative entry points. Dechinta programs demonstrate that there is another way. Rather than support students to adapt to their new environments, we go to them. We work with communities to create spaces for teaching and learning that aligns with their values and educational systems. Students who come from such experiences can enter other post-secondary education with increased self-confidence and with the ability to self-advocate and therefore learn in settings that have historically been hostile toward them.

Working With Communities to Connect to the Land and Revitalize Cultures, Societal and Economic Systems

Dechinta programs are platforms that connect Elders and academics together in a process of cocreation that results in unique program delivery methods that follow a common and transferable set of learning objectives. Dechinta's unique and adaptable programs are not

synonymous with prototyping or experimentation. Ours is a model of education older than the Canadian Federation, entrusted to us by those who share it so that it may deliver results for students in the community and beyond.

Following the release of the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (RCAP) report, the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), and the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Report, governments have emphasized the importance of providing culturally relevant curriculum for Indigenous students. Simply put, land-based education is Indigenous education.

At Dechinta, we understand the significant impact of bringing people together on the land, learning with the land, and cultivating a strong relationship to the land. Dechinta directly fulfills many RCAP and UNDRIP recommendations, and several of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's recommendations, including: the need to improve education attainment levels and success rates, the need to develop culturally appropriate curriculum, the need to teach and protect Indigenous languages, the need to create parental and community responsibility, control, and accountability over Indigenous schools systems and respecting and honouring Indigenous government relationships. Dechinta's programming has been designed to reduce the barriers that Indigenous people face when accessing post-secondary education. Dechinta emphasizes curriculum designed to ensure that all Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people are provided with safe, no-barrier, permanent, and meaningful access to their cultures and languages in order to restore, reclaim, and revitalize their cultures and identities. Additionally, Dechinta's mandate and programming are aligned with commitments made in the Arctic Policy Framework. We are bringing the policy recommendations of these reports to life through programs that empower and support Northern Indigenous practices of being and doing.

We are able to achieve the outcomes that we do by centering Indigenous laws, values, and protocols in all of our work. We take a multigenerational approach to learning, provide a holistic and embodied approach to education, centre Indigenous pedagogy in our programs, maintain strong and reciprocal community relationships, and prioritize the inclusion of local Elders and knowledge holders in all of our work. This is critical to our success as an organization and allows Dechinta to positively impact our staff, students, participants, children, and communities.

Indigenous land-based education is not just another form of “outdoor education”—it is a critical component of nation-building, political and cultural resurgence, decolonization, and addressing gender-based violence. Dechinta demonstrates how our students, staff, and community members learn more than just land-based skills when attending our programs. They learn community governance, ethics and laws, protocols and practices of harvesting and land stewardship, leadership skills, history and stories, language, confidence and pride around identity, and cultural knowledge and practices. These outcomes are cited in the field as key indicators of success and are evidenced to be key components to larger projects of fostering cultural revitalization and self-determination, improving health and wellness outcomes, generating food security, and addressing climate change.

Accessing Education in the North

Since 2019, Dechinta has offered 24 accredited and community-based programs, with 65 post-secondary students and over 2000 community participants ranging from ages 0–90 years old. Accessible education for Indigenous communities is especially important in the North, where academic performance and post-secondary rates are disproportionately low. In the literature, land-based education is associated with improved academic and career outcomes and connections for Indigenous students. These programs offer Indigenous students a learning

environment that is safe, supportive, culturally-relevant, and applicable to their own lives and this, in turn, improves student perspectives and experiences of education which leads to higher numbers of students connecting with further post-secondary education or different career goals.

Since 2019 Dechinta has worked hard to develop new programming in different regions across the North to increase access. This is the result of a long process of relationship building and community engagement to create sustainable and successful partnerships in the Yukon and across the NWT. In the past three years, we have partnered with or provided programming in 13 communities across the North and have increased capacity building across regions and organizations with more than 35 local community collaborations.

Dechinta has always been committed to creating innovative research programs and projects that are central to the development of an emerging northern research and knowledge economy. Over the past three years our research program has expanded significantly, building our capacity to contribute to knowledge dissemination across the circumpolar north . In addition to our 21 publications, we have reached over 18,000 participants in knowledge exchange activities such as conferences, workshops, public speakers' series, and on-the-land experiences, handed out over 3000 toolkits and research reports to local communities, had 450 online speaker series attendees, and have received over 7000 video views of our short films, webinars, and other media resources across multiple platforms.

Impact of Stable, Predictable and Multi-Year Funding

Stable, predictable and multi-year funding is critical for Dechinta and, for the students and communities we serve. It allows Dechinta to establish and maintain stable long-term relationships with the communities that request our programs. It also allows us to continue long-

term research and publication initiatives while giving students the assurance that their programs won't be cancelled. For recruitment purposes, it allows us to say to communities and to students, "We will be here for the next five years, so you can plan on our being able to provide employment opportunities. You can plan on our being able to support your education. If you're 16, we'll be here when you're ready to go to university. We'll provide those steps and those pathways." This long term stability has created predictability and resulted in an increased interest in Dechinta programming. For example, for our Summer 2023 Semester program we received over 80 applications.

Specifically, and as a snapshot, Dechinta has had the following impacts in the communities we partner with:

- More than 60 well-paying jobs were created in Northern and Arctic communities.
- 21 academic publications including the first book published by Dechinta students and faculty—*Ndè Sii Wet'aʔà: Northern Indigenous Voices on Land, Life and Art*.
- 18,000 participants in knowledge exchange activities such as conferences, workshops, public speakers series, and on-the-land experiences.
- \$350,000 received in research grants and directly invested in communities who participate in the research.
- In 2022 Dechinta hosted NAISA (Native American and Indigenous Studies Association), a multi-day internationally recognized academic conference, in Yellowknife, Whitehorse and online. This featured 90 academic guests and over 1000 community participants attend the various components of the conference.
- 150 days of land-based academic and community programming throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Student surveys reveal that 100% of students responded “yes” when asked whether they felt more confident in both their academic and land-based skills.
- Since 2019, Dechinta offered 9 community-based cultural programs which focused on learning cultural practices, language learning, harvesting medicines, and practising traditional skills such as making beaver mitts, sewing, and beading, 3 arts-based gatherings, has supported the creation of 3 short films documenting land-based knowledge, and has hired 6 Indigenous artists as guest instructors during our accredited programming.
- Dechinta staff and community Elders created a first hide tanning research book for students.
- Dechinta harvested over 23,000 lbs of food that was shared with communities over the past three years and during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- When it is safe to do so our staff often bring inexperienced hunters with them as a learning opportunity. This has allowed at least 30 community members to get experience harvesting since 2019, and learn about the land that they would otherwise not access.
- On average over the past three years, 95% of our students have identified as women or non-binary individuals.
- Dechinta recently published a gender toolkit that has been disseminated widely to students and communities in the North, we hosted a webinar series featuring two-spirit and queer land-based educators, and we also provide childcare during our accredited programming which combats a significant barrier for Indigenous women who want to further their education.
- During each academic program, an average of 10 children attend along with their parents.

Stable and predictable funding is fundamental to being able to provide the real foundation of what community-based and community codeveloped programming is, which is the strong relationships that are necessary to make it happen. It is the leverage that allows institutions like Dechinta to work directly with community to improve graduation rates and successful outcomes for Indigenous students.

As always, we are profoundly grateful to the Yellowknives Dene First Nation for working so closely with us over the past decade to anchor our organization and regional programming in embodied Dene ethics and values. This has been key to the success of Dechinta. Our organization exists because of the generosity and hospitality of Elders, knowledge holders, artists and harvesters in the North and we are grateful to work alongside their brilliance.

We are also grateful to the Government of Canada for investing in Dechinta programs that support this brilliance and Indigenous ingenuity. Extending stable, predictable and multi-year funding for Dechinta will empower us to continue our work to connect Indigenous communities to the resources they need cocreate land-based education opportunities that reconnect students to their roots and prepare them for lifetime connections to their community's cultural, social and economic and to Canada's prosperity.

About Dechinta:

The Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning is an Indigenous land-based initiative delivering accredited post-secondary education and research experiences in the North. Led by northern experts, Dechinta aims to engage students, researchers and community members in transformative academic programs based on the unique needs of Dene and Inuvialuit

communities. Our work is centered around three main pillars: Post-secondary accredited programs, research and community engagement.