

*Indigenous Works' Luminary  
Initiative Receives Five-Year  
Federal Funding to Address  
Innovation Gaps*

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**Kelly Lendsay**

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Kelly Lendsay



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For the past twenty-five years, Kelly Lendsay has served as the inaugural President and Chief Executive Officer of Indigenous Works (formerly the Aboriginal Human Resource Council). Established in 1998, the not-for-profit Indigenous organization is a response to the 1996 Report on the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples' recommendation to increase Indigenous employment and engagement in the Canadian economy: it was rebranded as Indigenous Works (IW) in 2016.

Prior to joining IW, Lendsay spent fifteen years in lifeguard and aquatic management and, in 1994, launched the first Aboriginal Business Education program in Canada at the University of Saskatchewan. He has deep roots in the Council for the Advancement of Native Development Officers (CANDO) and was a CANDO director and chair of the CANDO Education Committee in the mid-1990s. Lendsay also helped usher in the Journal of Aboriginal Economic Development and the Certified Economic Developers Program.

Lendsay's views on leadership are captured by the words of economist John Kenneth Galbraith: "All of the great leaders have had one characteristic in common: it was the willingness to confront unequivocally the major anxiety of their people in their time. This, and not much else, is the essence of leadership." Lendsay believes today's great anxiety is Canada's relationship with Indigenous Peoples—but he has plenty of positive examples of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and organizations overcoming adversity, growing social and economic capital, and building a renewed relationship, thanks, in no small part, to committed leadership. As he notes,

It's been over 25 years at Indigenous Works and there are many things that I'm proud of. One accomplishment has been the opportunity to make an impact with a considerable number of partners and projects. To make a difference in real-life social and economic challenges, you must address the major anxieties, challenges, and issues facing people. You must be courageous and take risks to do things differently. I am proud of IW's board and employer partners who are committed to doing things differently to make an impact. IW's culture is very entrepreneurial. We design, develop, and test new training, consulting, and tools with private and public sector companies and with Indigenous people. Over the years, we have been able to innovate leading-edge workplace systems, employer of choice certification programs, and diagnostic tools as our leadership commitment to advance Indigenous employment and workplace inclusion.

Indigenous Works is celebrating its 25th anniversary at Inclusion Works National Management Forum from October 8-10, 2024, in Nanaimo, British Columbia. It will be an opportunity to bring together people from across Canada to engage in deep management and executive learning and to celebrate its achievements over the past 25 years.

### ***A New Initiative to Address the Innovation Gap***

Lendsay still continues to innovate. Over the past few years, he has been building support for Luminary, a new initiative that will draw on research and innovation to accelerate economic transformation, job growth, and wellbeing. For example, in December 2023, Luminary successfully obtained five years of federal funding to create a new Indigenous-led institutional approach to advance an innovation ecosystem focused on Indigenous economic priorities. The funding came from Innovation, Science and Economic Development's new Strategic Science Fund (SSF) and Luminary was the only Indigenous-led initiative to receive this federal program funding. Overall, Luminary will support Indigenous businesses and organizations, post-secondary business schools and academic institutions, research agencies, NGOs, and private sector partners in their quest to develop Indigenous student and research talent and to foster new research and innovation collaborations that focus on Indigenous economic priorities and employ Indigenous-led approaches and models.

During the 2020-21 Covid years, more than 150 Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations signed up as Luminary Charter Partners. They co-created the Luminary Strategy through a series of regional and national online forums and incorporated eight impact themes into its strategic focus:

- (i) growing Indigenous research talent;
- (ii) Indigenous curriculum, knowledge, and student support;
- (iii) growing research collaborations;
- (iv) increasing innovation awareness, education, and skills;
- (v) building Indigenous leadership and institutional capacity for research and innovation;
- (vi) creating knowledge transfer and mobilization strategies;
- (vii) identifying and supporting Indigenous business innovation needs, priorities, and clusters, and;
- (viii) economic transformation, employment, and wellbeing: evaluation and measurement.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Innovation Is Second Nature to Indigenous People***

Lendsay understands the importance of innovation. As he points out,

Innovation is not new to Indigenous people. Just think of snowshoes, kayak, canoe, suspension bridges, medicines, Inuk snow goggles, igloo, teepee, longhouses, medicine wheel, governance, spear, bows and arrows and thousands of other examples of Indigenous innovation that generated social, economic, [and] community wellbeing for people and the land. Today, however, there is a gap between post-secondary business schools and our Indigenous economic business community and by closing this gap we will be able to grow Indigenous business talent and focus multi-disciplinary research and innovation on Indigenous economic priorities that will generate economic benefits for all Canadians.

Indigenous Peoples can innovate the same way their ancestors did before them for thousands of years.

Lendsay credits the new federal SSF as a significant opportunity to create Indigenous-led approaches in Canada's research and innovation space. "To date, the only players that could obtain institutional research and innovation program funding in Canada were universities and colleges," he says. The SSF opens a new door for Indigenous-led strategies to advance Canada's research and innovation agenda. While there has been considerable research activity in the social sciences, law, education, and health, the same is not true for Indigenous business and economics. This is why Luminary will focus on business schools and Canada's research community and the role they can play in growing Indigenous business talent and fostering multi-disciplinary Indigenous-led research and innovation with Indigenous businesses and economic organizations.

Ray Wanuch, Executive Director of CANDO, is a Luminary Charter partner and was among those who provided a letter of support for the Luminary SSF application. Luminary will grow the knowledge, capacity, and networks among Economic Development Officers (EDOs) and researchers to focus on Indigenous-led research activities, which is relevant to CANDO's own EDOs. Currently, the greatest challenges facing EDOs and the Indigenous business community are capacity related. The Luminary project will bring new management resources, knowledge networks, and systems to support Indigenous businesses and their connections to the business school community. Luminary will serve as a facilitator, connector, and advocate focusing on the potential of Indigenous-led research and innovation to grow Indigenous economies, drive employment, create new products and services, deepen multi-sectoral collaboration, and achieve new wellbeing outcomes. Luminary's strategy will focus on the measures needed to strengthen the Indigenous research and innovation ecosystem, and partners like CANDO play a vital role in this task.

### ***Luminary Is About Indigenous Innovation for Economic Development and Wellbeing***

What are the economic priorities that Luminary will focus on with its partners? According to Lendsay, "The Indigenous business community is already informing on areas such as artificial intelligence, food security, traditional knowledge, energy, carbon markets, land use, climate change, labour markets, financing systems, leadership, and governance. Every Indigenous economic priority has the propensity to generate multi-disciplinary research opportunities and create Indigenous-led approaches and models to research and innovation."

To this end, in 2021 Lendsay engaged Elder Albert Marshall in the co-creation of the Luminary strategy: it is based on the philosophy of Two-Eyed Seeing, which promotes using both traditional and Western knowledge to create new ways of knowing and doing that can benefit everyone and everything. Luminary recognizes that the approaches and drivers for Indigenous innovation are different than those of non-Indigenous businesses and institutions. The opportunity ahead is to create a distinct Indigenous-led ecosystem that builds on the best that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous

businesses and institutions have to offer. Indigenous-led research and innovation will create opportunities for Indigenous economies to make inroads in the newest and most strategic sectors of the economy.

The SSF acknowledges the importance of creating an Indigenous-led research ecosystem, and federal officials' discussion of Luminary's key strengths highlight the generational impact of this strategy:

First, the focus on building Indigenous business school curriculum and pedagogy as a way to attract more Indigenous business students and researchers. Second, to grow the knowledge, capacity and cultural competency of the research community and Indigenous business community to develop new research and innovation initiatives and collaborations. Third, to foster knowledge mobilization and networks and advance the Indigenous innovation eco-system and fourth, to create the first "engagement survey" of business schools to identify the current state of activity, strategy and practices and to affirm how best to support the efforts of business schools and the Indigenous community.

The Luminary strengths noted by the SSF reflect important priorities. Lendsay states that there are just a handful of Indigenous people pursuing a PhD, DBA (Doctor of Business Administration), MA or similar advanced degrees, but many more Indigenous business students are needed to grow the economy and advance Indigenous business research. The root of this issue, he notes, is the prevalence of curriculums and pedagogy with little to no Indigenous business content and voices: "While some business schools have attracted Indigenous undergraduate and MBA students, there are many schools that have only a handful or no Indigenous students at all. The academic research community sometimes has little to no relationship with the Indigenous business community and consequently, no focus on Indigenous innovation and research opportunities. Luminary will support partners' efforts to turn these gaps into opportunities via new programs, tools, and relationship networks." As part of this process, in 2024 Luminary will conduct an engagement scan of business schools in Canada. As Lendsay notes,

There is no clear picture on what business schools are currently doing. For example, we do not know the current number of Indigenous business students; what kind of student support programs exist? Would they like to develop support programs? There is no inventory of Indigenous curriculum and courses. Do they have an Indigenous strategy? Would they like to develop an Indigenous strategy? What kind of connections are there to Indigenous businesses or economic organizations? Has the business school adopted TRC Calls to Action and the National Indigenous Economic Strategy Calls to Actions? What kind of Indigenous-focused research has been achieved or is underway? What are their research areas and interests that could be aligned with Indigenous business community? The engagement scan data, information, and insights will

support the development of more targeted programs and supports for business schools and Indigenous businesses. Moreover, in the next five years, we can measure the change and gains through meaningful and purposeful strategies and practices.

By now, the importance of innovation should be clear, but Canada needs to step up if it is to become a global innovation leader. The Global Innovation Index reports that for the 13th year in a row, Switzerland is the most innovative economy in 2023, followed by Sweden, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Singapore. Canada ranks 15th. For Canada to become one of the most innovative economies, our Indigenous business community, business schools, and academic community must work together to create innovations that will impact generations to come. The business school engagement scan will create a baseline of people, programs, and services. It will serve as a benchmark for the Luminary partners over the next five years as they produce new outcomes and impacts, and it has the potential to increase Canada's ranking in the Global Innovation Index.

### ***Luminary Has Already Started to Grow and Mobilize New Knowledge Networks***

In addition to the business school engagement scan, the Luminary project will also build a new Knowledge Keepers website with various portals and resources, creating a place for Luminary partners to showcase and share their practices and expertise. "This will be a sharing place," says Lendsay. "The knowledge will help build the capacity and cultural competence of both the Indigenous and academic communities to grow everything from knowledge networks to new knowledge approaches to facilitating strategies which mobilize talent and grow business opportunities in research platforms." The growth of knowledge networks will help Indigenous people further extend their economies and advance the research and innovation needed to expand economic development horizons.

The Knowledge Keepers website builds upon existing efforts to expand Indigenous knowledge networks. By way of example, Lendsay notes that funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council was used to conduct sharing circles with Master's and PhD students to better understand their career and education journeys. This research with the Levene Hill School of Business (University of Regina), the Ted Rogers School of Business (Toronto Metropolitan University), the Sprott School of Business (Carleton University), and others has produced important insights into the supports needed to ensure Indigenous students advance into research positions and conduct research that is led by community needs and interests. Armed with this information, Luminary views its research activities with students as a strategic investment. As students advance their careers in university, college, and polytechnic institutions, it is important that they create the kinds of research and innovation ecosystems where Indigenous students will thrive. The interviews conducted to date underscore the perspective that students are often not provided with the supports needed to grow Indigenous-led



research and innovation. In response to this problem, Luminary developed a report for the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) called *Flight Paths ~ Engagement Plans to Grow Research Partnerships for Innovation with Indigenous Businesses and Post-Secondary Research Institutions*. The report focuses on five key sectoral priorities for Canada, with concept engagement plans for five sectors. The concept plans are organized into a framework that NSERC can use to develop future and deeper engagements. Another example of a knowledge network developed by Luminary is its work in agribusiness and food security. In 2020-21, Luminary received almost a half a million dollars from Protein Industries Canada, Agriculture and Agrifood Canada, and Nutrien. Collaborating with a wide array of partners, including experts at the University of Saskatchewan and University of Regina, Luminary produced a profile of the Indigenous agriculture and agrifood sector that included a report and strategies focused on innovation opportunities in this sector. Finally, Luminary engaged the First Nations University of Canada and its business school to examine how to design and develop a Lab2Market program concept for the Indigenous community and economy.

But that's not all. "More recently," says Lendsay, "Luminary will be doing some further exploration in a variety of economic sectors which hold promise for Indigenous people. Again, the idea is to establish knowledge networks which can collaborate on ways of merging academic and Indigenous interests to produce new vantage points for research and innovation which grow Indigenous economies." One example is Luminary's interest in the seaweed industry. Globally, seaweed generates \$17.5 billion annually. It is being farmed for food, fertilizer, and value-added products, and is utilized for its carbon-trapping properties: it offers many opportunities for Indigenous investment to meet the growing demand in the conventional market for sea plant extractions, functional foods, and other end uses while balancing the goals of sustainable, climate-smart agriculture. There are abundant supplies of seaweed species on all three Canadian coasts, and several Indigenous communities and organizations have direct experience and investments in seaweed. However, many of these activities are isolated, meaning development on the east coast may have little relationship with development on the west coast. Documentation about current development and activities on a national and global level has not been systematically assembled. The broadening of seaweed industry knowledge and purview could help Indigenous businesses to learn more about opportunities and where and how they could be started and scaled. This, too, is the work of Luminary: to be a catalyst for new and exciting economic growth opportunities.

Ultimately, developing an industry strategy in this area could identify the pathways for Indigenous people to pursue employment and business and economic development, as well as potentially achieving a competitive commercial position. As interest in the seaweed sector gains momentum globally, it will be important to consider how Indigenous people in Canada could stake their own claim and identify the unique areas of the industry where they can secure a differentiated niche and a competitive advantage.

## ***Inclusion and Innovation: Game Changers for Economic and Wellbeing Transformation***

### **Inclusion**

When it comes to workplace inclusion, Lendsay believes that non-Indigenous businesses have had a different line of thinking in recent times. “I’ve seen a change in the last 5-6 years,” he says, “and reconciliation has helped in part. We are supporting employers and businesses to go beyond the romantic and cosmetic approach to reconciliation. They need to progress from activities and events to deeper engagement, employment, procurement, and business strategies. We need to advance an economic reconciliation agenda.” In the same way that Indigenous Works and its Employer Partner members are credited with numerous accomplishments over the last 25 years, the Luminary partners will grow the Indigenous innovation ecosystem.

### **Innovation**

Likewise, when it comes to Indigenous innovation, the new Luminary Strategic Science Fund will generate new knowledge, networks, research, and economic benefits for Canada and the world. Lendsay reminds us that we are building upon the ancient wisdom and experience of those before us: “Both Indigenous Works and the new Luminary initiative can have impacts on Canada’s social and economic communities and peoples, but it is important that the right institutions, systems, governance, and management are built to support and grow a future which enables Indigenous needs and rights.”

Lendsay closes by citing the words of the Sioux leader Chief Sitting Bull: “Let us put our minds together and see what life we can make for our children.” These words capture the essence of inclusion and innovation: Sitting Bull practiced inclusion when referring to “our children” among his white and brown brothers and sisters. And he challenged all of us to use our minds—our innovative ingenuity—to address the major issues of our time and create a new future for people, communities, and the land.

### **END NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> From Luminary ~ Advancing Indigenous Innovation for Economic Transformation, Employment and Wellbeing Strategy 2022-2026, by Luminary & Indigenous Works, 2022, p. 1.