

# Response to the Report of the Presidential Advisory Committee on Principles to Guide Recognition and Commemoration

May 26, 2023

Institutions of higher education, along with many other public institutions, have become increasingly aware of the need to acknowledge and reckon with their long and complex histories. Frequently, these histories are embodied in the names we have conferred on buildings, academic units, and activities. They may also be reflected in the honours such institutions have conferred on individuals in the past.

Among the many manifestations of this increasing awareness are the calls to change the name of a public building or place, or to rescind an award, distinction or honorary degree, in those cases in which the individual, group or event so honoured reflects beliefs or practices that are now recognized as reprehensible. In recent years, universities and other prominent organizations have grappled with the challenging question of how to respond when past namings or honours have been linked to deeds, beliefs or values that would now be judged as abhorrent or anathema to their own contemporary values.

With our fundamental commitment to the principle of inclusive excellence, it is incumbent upon us to address all aspects of our own complex history, including historical and continuing injustices. This is also an opportunity to reflect on the values we wish to honour and enshrine in future namings.

To that end, it is important to establish a coherent set of principles to guide such decisions – to ensure that requests for de-recognition can be handled fairly and consistently, and that future namings and commemorations will express our shared values and aspirations. For institutions of higher education, which are dedicated to advancing excellence, equity and justice, and committed to rational, evidence-based deliberation and debate, such principles are essential. Accordingly, in June 2022 I established a [Presidential Advisory Committee](#) with a mandate to identify such a set of principles, to make recommendations regarding appropriate processes to follow, and to consider whether any of our existing policies might need to be revised.

The Committee, chaired by University Professor Cheryl Misak, fulfilled its mandate admirably. In its [Report](#), released today with this Response, it identifies a set of principles on which we should ground our approach. It also offers several recommendations and suggestions on how we might act on those principles going forward. Perhaps most importantly, its work has been guided and inspired by the University of Toronto’s core values, as articulated in foundational documents such as our [Statement of Institutional Purpose](#). Its work was also informed by the extensive consultation it undertook, as outlined in Appendix 2 and Appendix 3 of its Report.

Following its consultation and careful deliberations, the Committee wisely emphasizes “the necessarily high bar”<sup>1</sup> for de-naming or de-recognition. It stresses the importance of the University instituting “a legitimate, consistent, and transparent process” for approaching such decisions, one that is “centred on principles, including the principle of due process”, and that is “aligned with the governance structure of the University.”<sup>2</sup>

And helpfully, the Committee encourages the University to “consider a full range of remedies.”<sup>3</sup> Acknowledging the University’s educational mission, the Report emphasizes the important opportunities arising from de-recognition decisions “to acknowledge problematic aspects of its history by bringing them to light and providing educational opportunities around them ... [and] to understand our history more fully” with the assistance of plaques, installations or other devices to “enhance our understanding of our complex past.”<sup>4</sup> In light of the need for a “high bar”, and the University’s educational mission, the Committee “expects most de-recognitions to be contextualizations.”<sup>5</sup>

Importantly, given Canada’s particular history of oppression of, and injustices experienced by, Indigenous peoples, the Committee emphasizes the “special attention”<sup>6</sup> that should be paid to potential de-recognitions that acknowledge this shameful past and, in doing so, advance the important work of reconciliation. It also encourages the University to seek opportunities to

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<sup>1</sup> Report, p. 4

<sup>2</sup> Report, p. 4

<sup>3</sup> Report, p. 5

<sup>4</sup> Report, p. 5

<sup>5</sup> Report, p. 5

<sup>6</sup> Report, p. 5

recognize and commemorate Indigenous history, language and continued presence on our campuses through future namings.

In a similar vein, the Report emphasizes the need to recognize other peoples who have been the victims of historical injustices such as “enslavement, genocide, antisemitism, racism, and misogyny.”<sup>7</sup> The Committee further recommends that future recognitions and commemorations should reflect the full diversity of our community, including these other historically marginalized groups.

**On behalf of the University, I accept all of the principles articulated by the Committee. I also accept all four of the Committee’s recommendations, and we will act expeditiously to implement them.**

In particular, the Provost and I will give our immediate consideration to how best to constitute a diverse, representative and knowledgeable new administrative committee charged with (i) receiving and reviewing de-recognition proposals, (ii) initiating investigation into those cases that, in its judgement, warrant further research, and (iii) recommending a course of action to the relevant committee of University governance (typically the Committee on Naming or the Committee for Honorary Degrees).

I also wish to thank the Committee for proposing a number of constructive suggestions, pertaining to the *Policy on Naming*, the Terms of Reference and Guidelines for the Committee for Honorary Degrees, and the question of term limits for particular namings. These suggestions will be given careful consideration as we implement the Committee’s recommendations. Some of them will require additional, focused consultations across the University to ensure that any prospective changes have the support of our broader community and are respectful of the autonomy and objectives of our academic divisions and units, prior to being recommended to governance for approval as appropriate.

On behalf of the University, I would like to thank Professor Misak and all the members of the Committee for their outstanding work. I would also like to thank the many members of the

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<sup>7</sup> Report, p. 4



University community who took part in the consultation process. This exercise has demonstrated once again the expertise and good will that we find in abundance throughout the U of T community, and it bodes well for our ability to deal appropriately and effectively with even the most complex and difficult of challenges ahead.

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