

Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION

Research involving Indigenous peoples and communities has increasingly highlighted the importance of approaches that are grounded in Indigenous sovereignty and governance, knowledge systems, community priorities, self-determination, and relational accountability. While institutional research ethics boards play an important role within the broader research landscape, there is growing recognition that Indigenous-led ethics processes can address dimensions of community authority, cultural responsibility, reciprocity, and Indigenous data governance that conventional ethics frameworks are not designed to fully address.

Against this backdrop, the Aboriginal Health and Wellness Centre of Winnipeg Inc. (AHWC) has been exploring the potential development of an Urban Indigenous Research Lodge – Ethics Board (UIRL-EB). As AHWC continues to strengthen its role as a leader in Indigenous health and wellness, questions emerged regarding how research involving urban Indigenous peoples could be supported in ways that are culturally grounded, accountable to community, reflective of the realities of diverse urban Indigenous communities, and ethically aligned with Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

The feasibility study drew on multiple sources of evidence, including:

- a review of AHWC documents,
- a review of academic and practice-based literature,
- an environmental scan of existing ethics processes,
- 22 survey responses from community organizations, researchers, and institutional partners,
- focus groups with AHWC staff and peer advisory members, and
- interviews with six Elders and Knowledge Holders.

Together, these perspectives provide a broad and community-informed description of the opportunities, challenges, and practical considerations associated with developing a UIRL-EB.

Across all sources of evidence, one finding emerged with remarkable consistency: **there is strong support for the development of an Indigenous-led ethics process**. There was broad agreement that such a model could serve an important role within the research ecosystem and in supporting urban Indigenous communities in Winnipeg. The findings suggest that the feasibility of a UIRL-EB is not primarily a question of need or support, but rather one of thoughtful design, governance, implementation, and long-term sustainability.

Purpose of the Feasibility Study

The purpose of this study was to assess the feasibility of establishing an Urban Indigenous Research Lodge – Ethics Board (UIRL-EB) at AHWC and to identify key considerations that

should inform future development. Particular attention was given to self-determination, community accountability, Indigenous governance and data sovereignty, relationships with existing institutional research ethics boards, and the practical realities of implementing and sustaining an Indigenous-led ethics process.

This work recognizes that urban Indigenous communities occupy a unique space within the research landscape. While existing institutional research ethics boards play an important role in protecting research participants, they are often not designed to address Indigenous realities in urban contexts, including Indigenous governance, collective rights, community accountability, Indigenous knowledge systems, Indigenous data sovereignty, or the distinctiveness across First Nations, Métis, and Inuit knowledges, worldviews, and values. The feasibility study, therefore, explored whether a complementary Indigenous-led ethics process could help address these gaps.

STUDY FINDINGS

Document Review

The document review demonstrated that AHCW already possesses a strong and well-developed foundation for ethical practice. Existing organizational frameworks consistently emphasize Indigenous self-determination, relational accountability, community well-being, distinctions-based approaches, and the principle of “nothing about us without us.”

Rather than representing a new direction, the development of a UIRL-EB emerged as a natural extension of AHCW’s existing values, frameworks, and practices. The creation of the UIRL itself reflects AHCW’s growing role in Indigenous-led research and a broader progression toward more structured approaches to Indigenous research governance. The organization has already established a strong ethical foundation grounded in Indigenous worldviews and community-centered approaches to care, research, and governance.

The review also highlighted AHCW’s commitment to Indigenous data governance and stewardship, including recognition of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit approaches to authority, accountability, and knowledge stewardship. These existing commitments provide an important foundation for any future ethics process.

In many respects, the findings suggest that AHCW is not beginning this work from scratch. Instead, the organization is building upon an established foundation of values, relationships, and ethical commitments that already align closely with the principles underpinning Indigenous-led research ethics.

Literature Review

The literature review revealed that Indigenous research ethics are fundamentally different from conventional institutional research ethics processes. Across First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and urban Indigenous contexts, ethics are consistently understood as relational, ongoing, and grounded in Indigenous values and knowledge systems. Ethical responsibility is not viewed as a single approval event occurring before research begins, but as a commitment that extends throughout the entire research lifecycle.

The literature also demonstrated that there is no single Indigenous model for research ethics review. Indigenous ethics processes vary significantly depending on governance structures, cultural teachings, community priorities, and local contexts. This diversity is not a weakness. Rather, it reflects the importance of grounding ethics processes within the realities of the communities they are intended to serve.

Importantly, the literature consistently identifies Indigenous-led ethics processes as complementary to institutional research ethics boards rather than replacements for them. Indigenous ethics bodies often address dimensions of governance, accountability, reciprocity, collective rights, cultural protocols, and community benefit that institutional review processes are not designed or able to address.

The literature suggests that successful Indigenous ethics processes depend less on replicating existing models and more on intentional design choices related to Indigenous governance and authority, scope, accountability, data sovereignty, resourcing, and sustainability.

Environmental Scan

The environmental scan examined existing Indigenous and non-Indigenous ethics review models across Canada and beyond.

Findings revealed substantial differences between Indigenous-led ethics processes and conventional institutional research ethics boards. Indigenous ethics processes were far more likely to emphasize relationship-building, collective accountability, community benefit, Indigenous governance, data sovereignty, cultural protocols, and ongoing engagement throughout the research process.

The scan also highlighted the relative scarcity of formal Indigenous-led ethics review bodies, particularly within urban Indigenous contexts where few established models currently exist. While examples do exist, many Indigenous communities and organizations continue to face gaps in access to ethics processes that adequately reflect Indigenous governance systems and urban Indigenous realities.

These findings reinforce both the uniqueness and potential significance of a future UIRL-EB. They also demonstrate that while useful examples exist, there is no single blueprint to follow. Any future model will need to reflect AHC's specific context, relationships, and community priorities.

Survey of Key Partners and Stakeholders

Survey findings demonstrated strong support for the creation of a UIRL-EB among community organizations, academic researchers, institutional partners, and other stakeholders.

Participants consistently identified shortcomings within existing ethics review systems when applied to urban Indigenous contexts. Many described current processes as being overly procedural, insufficiently responsive to Indigenous knowledge systems, and poorly equipped to navigate the complexities of urban Indigenous communities where multiple Nations, identities, governance relationships, and lived experiences intersect. More broadly,

respondents expressed limited confidence that existing research ethics systems adequately address the realities and priorities of urban Indigenous communities.

Respondents emphasized that Indigenous governance and community authority should be central to research ethics decision-making. There was widespread agreement that ethical research involving Indigenous peoples requires more than institutional compliance; it requires meaningful relationships, community accountability, reciprocity, and tangible benefits for community.

Participants identified numerous potential benefits of a UIRL-EB, including:

- Stronger accountability in research involving Indigenous communities
- Greater ownership and control over research processes
- Improved transparency and trust
- Stronger research relationships
- More meaningful community benefits
- Increased support and mentorship for Indigenous researchers
- Greater alignment between research practices and Indigenous values

At the same time, respondents emphasized the importance of clear mandates, strong partnerships, adequate resources, and thoughtful integration with existing research systems.

Focus Groups

Focus group participants reinforced many of the themes identified elsewhere in the study while providing important perspectives grounded in day-to-day organizational and community realities.

Participants consistently described ethics as relational, practical, and deeply connected to trust. They emphasized that ethical research cannot be reduced to forms, approvals, or procedural requirements. Instead, ethical practice requires ongoing accountability, respectful relationships, reciprocity, and responsiveness to community priorities.

Participants also highlighted the importance of ensuring that any future ethics process remains practical, accessible, culturally grounded, and responsive to the realities of urban Indigenous communities. Discussions frequently emphasized the need to balance structure with flexibility and accountability with relationship.

The focus groups underscored the importance of ensuring that any future UIRL-EB remains connected to community while maintaining sufficient clarity and consistency to support researchers, partners, and participating organizations.

Interviews with Elders and Knowledge Holders

The interviews with Elders and Knowledge Holders provided some of the most profound insights within the study.

Across interviews, research was consistently described as a relational and ethical responsibility, rather than simply a technical or academic activity. Elders emphasized that ethical research must be accountable to Indigenous communities, grounded in Indigenous teachings, and guided by principles of respect, reciprocity, humility, and relationship.

While there was strong alignment across interviews, each Elder brought distinct perspectives regarding governance, ceremony, accountability, community protection, decision-making, and cultural responsibility. Collectively, these perspectives reinforced the need for an ethics process that is Indigenous-led, culturally grounded, and accountable to community.

Elders also emphasized the importance of balancing structure with flexibility. While governance, policies, and processes are important, participants repeatedly stressed that ethical practice ultimately depends on relationships, integrity, and accountability in action.

The interviews strongly reinforced the view that Indigenous ethics processes must reflect Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and relating, while remaining responsive to the diversity of urban Indigenous communities.

Cross-Cutting Findings

While each line of evidence contributed unique insights, several themes emerged consistently across all sources.

Governance and Authority

There is broad agreement that a future UIRL-EB should be Indigenous-led and grounded in community authority. Participants consistently emphasized that Indigenous governance should occupy a central role in ethical decision-making, rather than functioning as an advisory component to institutional systems. Governance structures should include meaningful participation from Elders, Knowledge Holders, community members, and individuals with lived experience. At the same time, there is a need for clarity regarding mandate, authority, roles, responsibilities, and decision-making processes.

Representation and Inclusion

A key and consistent theme throughout the data collection emphasized that representation must be substantive rather than symbolic. Participants emphasized that urban Indigenous communities are diverse and include First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and individuals with varied cultural, geographic, and lived experiences. A future ethics process must be capable of recognizing and respecting this complexity. The study also highlighted the importance of ensuring meaningful involvement for individuals with lived and living experience in governance and decision-making processes.

Ethics Processes and Ways of Knowing

One of the strongest findings across the study was that ethics should be understood as an ongoing relationship rather than a one-time approval process. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of relational accountability, reciprocity, trust, and community benefit. Indigenous ethics processes were viewed as extending across the entire research lifecycle and incorporating Indigenous knowledge systems, cultural teachings, and wholistic

understandings of wellness. There was widespread recognition that conventional checklist-based ethics review processes are insufficient for addressing Indigenous realities and priorities.

Accountability, Data Governance, and Community Benefit

The study identified strong support for Indigenous data sovereignty and Indigenous authority over research data and knowledge. Participants emphasized that communities must have meaningful authority regarding how information is collected, interpreted, stored, shared, and used. Ethical research should contribute tangible benefits to Indigenous communities and should include mechanisms that prevent extractive or exploitative research practices. Trust also emerged as both a prerequisite for ethical research and one of its most important outcomes.

Partnerships, Integration, and Sustainability

Participants consistently recognized that a UIRL-EB would operate within a broader research ecosystem. Strong relationships with academic institutions, existing research ethics boards, community organizations, and other partners will be essential. Participants highlighted the importance of collaboration, coordination, and potentially developing pathways for mutual recognition between ethics processes. Long-term sustainability emerged as a critical consideration. Dedicated resources, staffing, infrastructure, capacity-building, and sustainable funding will all be necessary to support successful implementation.

Conclusion

This feasibility study provides a clear foundation for moving forward with the development of an Urban Indigenous Research Lodge – Ethics Board. Across all lines of evidence, there was strong support for the creation of an Indigenous-led ethics process grounded in community authority, Indigenous knowledge systems, relational accountability, and Indigenous self-determination. No source of evidence suggested that such a model should not proceed; instead, participants consistently identified both the need and the opportunity for a research ethics process that better reflects the realities of urban Indigenous communities.

The findings also demonstrate that AHCW is uniquely positioned to advance this work. Existing organizational values, ethical frameworks, relationships, and commitments to Indigenous governance provide a strong foundation upon which future development can build. In this sense, the UIRL-EB would not represent a departure from AHCW's work but a continuation and strengthening of its long-standing commitment to community-centered, culturally grounded, and wholistic approaches to health, wellness, research, and accountability.

Taken together, the findings suggest that a UIRL-EB is feasible and that there is strong support for further development. The task ahead is one of thoughtful design and implementation: developing a model that is grounded in Indigenous values, responsive to community realities, accountable to those it serves, integrated within broader research systems, and sustainable over time. This will require clear decisions about governance,

representation, authority, process design, institutional relationships, resourcing, and sequencing.

Achieving this will require continued engagement, careful planning, and an iterative approach that honours the diversity, strengths, and aspirations of urban Indigenous communities. With appropriate structures, relationships, and resources in place, a UIRL-EB has the potential to become more than an ethics review process. It can serve as a meaningful expression of Indigenous governance, community accountability, and ethical research practice in an urban Indigenous context.



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