

# Social Innovation in Higher Education: A Preliminary Review of the Research

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# **Social Innovation**

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Research Task**

How can institutes of higher education work with communities to ensure students have the knowledge and skills to succeed in life and work, while simultaneously helping to address the complex social challenges the modern world is facing?

The aim of this research paper is to review the literature on social innovation as it pertains to higher education, including purpose, benefits, and conditions for implementation. Of particular focus will be how applied learning can be leveraged to advance the aims of social innovation on college and university campuses. Finally, links between social innovation, Indigenous approaches to knowing and learning, and Indigenous social innovation will also be explored.

## **2. What is Social Innovation?**

The literature on social innovation is rife with definitions; central to most however, is the idea of applying novel means to address complex social challenges, be they at the community, state or global level. A widely-cited definition in the research literature is that of Frances Westley (2012), a leading theorist and researcher in the field of social innovation based at the University of Waterloo's Institute for Social Innovation and Resilience:

In the context of changing the system dynamics that created the problem in the first place, a social innovation is any initiative (product, process, program, project, policy or platform) that challenges and, over time, contributes to changing the defining routines, resource and authority flows or beliefs of the broader social system in which it is introduced.

Successful social innovations reduce vulnerability and enhance resilience. They have durability, scale and transformative impact. (Westley 2012)

Westley's definition stands out from other conceptions of social innovation for its reference to resilience. According to Westley, social innovation must include the active participation and contributions of vulnerable and marginalized groups if social systems are to have the resilience to withstand and adapt to change. (Caulier-Grice et al, 2012, p. 13).

In contrast to Westley's definition and its emphasis on the importance of systems-level change, the Stanford Center for Social Innovation frames social innovation in broader terms, with a more explicit focus on equity and sustainability. They define social innovation as: 'A novel solution to a social problem that is more effective, efficient, sustainable, or just than existing solutions and for which the value created accrues primarily to society as a whole rather than private individuals.' (Phills, Deiglmeier, and Miller, 2008, p. 36).

The UK-based Young Foundation's definition of social innovations similarly emphasizes parity, though it also stresses the need for collaboration and social empowerment.

We define social innovations as new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations. In other words, they are innovations that are both good for society *and* enhance society's capacity to act. (The Young Foundation, 2010, p. 3).

Indigenous social innovation, as characterized by the Waterloo Institute for Social Innovation and Resilience (WISIR), combines elements of the above with an Indigenous perspective and approach, representing 'a unique type of social innovation continually informed by the application of indigenous knowledge to promote the resurgence of indigenous knowledge and practices, as guided by the wisdom of the ancestors' (WISIR n.d.).

For the purposes of this paper, it is worth bearing in mind aspects of each of these definitions: inclusive, collaborative, novel solutions that address and resolve pressing social problems. Within the context of higher education in Canada, a definition of social innovation would need to also reference student learning, including its experiential nature, Indigenous approaches to education, and the collaboration between communities and the institution to simultaneously meet educational as well as social outcomes.

### **3. What does the Literature on Social Innovation Tell Us?**

#### **3.1 Why Social Innovation?**

The world over, in response to changing political landscapes, economic realities, and increasingly complex social challenges, colleges and universities are seeking alternative means to prepare the next generation for life, work, and citizenship.

In turn, social innovation has come into sharper focus in the past decade or so due to the growing realization that existing systems are not able to resolve many of the social issues facing the world today, such as migration, disease, climate change and global conflict (The Young Foundation 2010, p. 3). In addition, recognition of the increasing inequality between individuals, communities and nations has fed a generalized desire to make systems more equitable, as well as sustainable (see e.g. the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals for 2015 and the Sustainable Development Goals for 2030) (United Nations [UN] 2015; United Nations [UN] 2017). This realization, combined with the ubiquity of technology (and perhaps in particular the global information network it has spawned), has contributed to the emergence of social innovation in a variety of sectors across the globe, including education (Murray et al, 2010, p. 5).

At the same time, it is recognized that traditional approaches to social challenges are not inclusive of and may not adequately address the needs of the people involved. Social innovation shifts the power balance such that disadvantaged people are not only included in the conversation, but are a key part of the solution. In the words of Westley and Antazde (2010, p. 5), 'social innovation not only *serves* vulnerable populations, but is *served* by them in turn' (emphasis in original). This stands in contrast to more traditional approaches that serve to position those on society's margins as helpless or without agency.

#### **3.2 Higher Education's Role in Social Innovation**

A well-documented question for education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is how to prepare students for the challenges of a world that is increasingly technologically, economically, and socially complex. Traditional 'top-down' approaches to teaching and learning have long been recognized as not meeting the needs of today's learners, who in addition to acquiring skills that will prepare them for work and life, will need to master the '21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills' of learning and innovation (referred to as the 4Cs of creativity, critical thinking, communication and

collaboration) (Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning 2016; Scott, 2015); a fifth 'C', for culture or inter-cultural competence, is also often included in the literature (see e.g. Scott, 2015, p. 8).

Alongside this pedagogical shift, higher education institutions are facing increasing pressure to contribute to the resolution of the social challenges referred to above. The question is, what role can higher education best play? And how can it simultaneously prepare students for a successful life and career?

In many respects, institutes of higher learning are uniquely placed to lead and champion social innovation. Firstly, tackling complex social issues provides the impetus as well as the context for the kinds of learning opportunities that will arguably equip students with the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in the contemporary world; skills such as collaboration, critical thinking, problem-solving, and so on. Secondly, the purpose and work of higher education – to teach and conduct research – already contributes significantly to society's advancement. Engaging with community and other partners to actively contribute to initiatives that positively impact individuals, communities, and the broader world is therefore a logical next step (Strandberg 2017, p. 8). Finally, many higher education institutions are already heavily invested in social innovation due to the emphasis they place on professional workforce training and development, community partnerships and civic engagement (Guild HE in press cited in Elliot 2013, p. 71).

Taking this argument to the next level is the notion that higher education has an obligation to address social issues and actively contribute to their resolution. Writing in the *Journal of Applied Learning in Higher Education*, Clayton and her colleagues (2014, p. 6) assert:

**...we find compelling the notion that the academy can and should play a considerable role in nurturing democracy, strengthening communities, and supporting the flourishing of all life** (e.g., Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011; Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003). We want our students to become builders of a better tomorrow (Hartman, 2013)—co-creators, with us and others, of a world that is increasingly peaceful, compassionate, just, inclusive, and verdant. And we believe that our day-to-day work should contribute actively and effectively to these ends. (emphasis added) (Clayton et al, 2014, p. 6).

This call to action is echoed by institutions such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the European Commission, among others urging higher education's greater participation 'in resolving global challenges such as poverty, food scarcity, climate change, energy and water security' (Puukka 2017). As the UNESCO Communique on Higher Education states:

Faced with the complexity of current and future global challenges, higher education has the social responsibility to advance our understanding of multifaceted issues, which involve social, economic, scientific and cultural dimensions and our ability to respond to them. It should lead society in generating global knowledge to address global challenges, inter alia food security, climate change, water management, intercultural dialogue, renewable energy and public health. (UNESCO, 2009, p.2).

Higher education institutions are responding to the challenge, with many firmly on the path to social innovation, addressing community as well as more global issues through human capital and skills development, research and development initiatives, policies, activities, and services (Pukka 2017). Community engagement initiatives are becoming increasingly common, for example, with opportunities for students to participate in experiential learning activities with an explicit social focus also expanding. As documented by Strandberg (2017, p. 12), other examples of social infrastructure development in post-secondary institutions include:

- social innovation centres
- incubators, accelerators and labs
- problem-solving multi-sector collaborations, partnerships and platforms
- open data portals, social evidence centres and social indicators observatories
- social entrepreneurial and experiential learning programs for students
- social finance, hiring and procurement
- social purpose real estate
- organizational narratives explaining the role of societal transition

### **3.2.1 Applied Learning and Social Innovation**

Community engagement features increasingly in higher education strategic plans, as institutions look for ways to partner with and contribute to communities and civil society. At the same time, students are looking for educational experiences that enable them to develop the skills and competencies needed to succeed in work and life. Increasingly, students are also looking for opportunities to contribute to their communities and society at large. Applied learning<sup>1</sup> offers the opportunity to address these needs, providing the context for community

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, 'applied learning' includes a range of activities and opportunities that enable students to put theory into practice, including e.g. experiential learning, work-integrated learning, service learning, practicums, clinical experiences, among others.

partnerships and enabling students to meet their learning goals, including skills mastery, through 'learning by doing', while at the same time contributing to communities and strengthening their civic responsibility. Further, the knowledge and skills students develop through social learning opportunities helps in 'enabling them to bring social innovation insights and networks to future work and civic roles' (Schultz 2016, p. 11).

Finally, as argued by Strandberg (2017, p. 8), higher education is waking up to the realization that in addition to attending to student gaps in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), it also needs to address learning gaps and challenges in the social sciences, including reconciliation, inequality, and so on. Applied learning enables higher education institutions, students and communities to work in partnership to facilitate these mutually beneficial social learning opportunities.

### **3.3 Benefits of Social Innovation**

Social innovation benefits students, higher education, and community (whether local or global) in numerous and often profound ways. In addition to providing opportunities for hands-on learning that will enable students to acquire real-life skills that will enhance their careers and lives, participating in and contributing to social innovation initiatives promotes social responsibility and civic engagement, as well as empathy. Research by Astin and his colleagues (2000) demonstrates that service participation, for example, has a positive impact on several outcome measures, including:

- academic performance (GPA, writing skills, critical thinking skills)
- values (commitment to activism and to promoting racial understanding)
- choice of a service career, and plans to participate in service after college
- self-efficacy, leadership, and interpersonal skills

Similarly, according to the Canadian Alliance for Community Service Learning, benefits to student learning outcomes extend beyond the academic to include skills development and competencies, work experience, career development, and civic responsibility (Gemmel and Clayton 2009, p. 5), including:

- opportunities to create real change with communities
- learning about community issues in whole new ways (i.e. in ways that could not be achieved through publications and classroom teaching)

- acquiring and enhancing specific skills and competencies
- developing an awareness of career opportunities and personal and professional development paths they may not have been previously aware of

Finally, an important, if less tangible benefit of social innovation is the boost it gives to inclusion, resilience and inventiveness resulting from the increase in social capital and trust it engenders (Strandberg 2017, p. 11).

### **3.4 Social Innovation in Higher Education**

As noted above, higher education has embraced social innovation, with community engagement increasingly featured in strategic plans and institutions putting measures in place to effect social change in partnership with communities through work placement opportunities, research, curriculum, and so on. Alongside this, opportunities for applied learning are multiplying, with colleges and universities offering a range of ways for students to combine learning with community service and other social learning initiatives.

Canadian institutes of higher education, including the University of Waterloo's Institute for Social Innovation and Resilience (WISIR), the University of British Columbia's Centre for Community Engaged Learning, Simon Fraser University's social innovation lab and venture incubator, among others, are leading social innovation research and initiatives, offering students the opportunity to contribute to and experience social change while pursuing higher education.

They are joined by social enterprise incubators in schools across the country (Huddart 2017), as well as the perhaps more well-known co-operative education and service learning programs, applied research projects, and internships that have been woven into the educational fabric of many institutions, including community colleges and universities alike, for decades.

In addition to these innovation centres or hubs, a growing number of social innovation leadership and training initiatives and courses now exist, such as Suncor Energy Foundation's Banff summer residency and Simon Fraser University's social innovation certificate program.

Higher education's efforts to address social challenges has the support of both national and international organizations (Strandberg 2017, p. 14). Within Canada, for example, the Vancouver Island Social Innovation Zone 'supports social innovation, social enterprise and social

finance that generates positive economic, social and environmental impacts' (Vancouver Island Social Innovation Zone, 2016). Similarly, the MaRS innovation hub works with an extensive network of partners to act as a social incubator to help create successful global businesses from Canada's science, technology and social sectors (MaRS, 2017).

Further afield, Ashoka U catalyzes social innovation in higher education through a global network of entrepreneurial students, faculty and community leaders. Ryerson University and Wilfrid Laurier University are among Ashoka U's designated 'Changemaker Campuses', recognized 'as hubs of social innovation, with pioneering programs, partnerships, and curriculum in social entrepreneurship (Ashoka Canada's Changemaker Campuses, n.d.), with Simon Fraser University joining as the first institution in BC in July of 2017 (SFU News, 2017).

See Strandberg 2017 for a comprehensive list of social infrastructure initiatives occurring in advanced education institutions, as well as a link to a working document for institutions to add the work they are doing.

### **3.5 Indigenous Social Innovation**

'Innovation isn't always about creating new things. Innovation sometimes involves looking back at our old ways and bringing them forward to this new situation.' (Senator Murray Sinclair, cited in Huddart 2017, p. 7).

Senator Sinclair's words eloquently capture what the Waterloo Institute for Social Innovation and Resilience offers as their 'working definition' of Indigenous social innovation: 'a unique type of social innovation continually informed by the application of indigenous knowledge to promote the resurgence of indigenous knowledge and practices, as guided by the wisdom of the ancestors.' (Indigenous Innovation, n.d.).

Indigenous social innovation seems to be in the early stages of development and mobilization. Questions posed at a one-day symposium, 'Kinomaagwinan maamwaye: exploring indigenist methodologies and social innovation' held by Shawn Wilson and Frances Westley, leaders in the fields of Indigenist methodologies and social innovation, respectively, serve to illustrate this (Indigenous Innovation, n.d.):

- What is an Indigenist research paradigm?
- Can we have Indigenist innovation?

- Can/should social innovation be interpreted using an Indigenist paradigm?
- Does social innovation have useful tools and strategies for fostering change in Indigenous communities?
- What are the opportunities and barriers to advancing change-oriented critical Indigenist research at the University of Waterloo?

It also appears, however, that Indigenous social innovation is on the rise, with preliminary research suggesting that social innovations initiated and led by Indigenous peoples prioritize holistic health and well-being and have a strong link to sustainability and social justice agendas. The Waterloo Institute for Social Innovation and Resilience, for example, notes that future research and innovations will focus on resource and environmental management in Canada and abroad (Indigenous Innovation, n.d.).

Social innovation initiatives with a focus on Indigenous education are also gaining traction in Canada. In 2011, for example, Ashoka Changemakers initiated a competition for innovative approaches to First Nations early childhood development, adult education, employment and at risk youth, resulting in 266 entries and nearly \$100,000 in awards (The Circle on Philanthropy and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada, 2014, cited in Volynets 2015). Following on the success of this initiative, the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, partnered with Indigenous communities (and others) to support innovative solutions to Indigenous education, as well as a more recent truth and reconciliation initiative (Volynets 2015).

A strong theme in the literature on Indigenous education and research is that of the importance of relationship. In the words of Indigenous educator and researcher Cyndy Baskin, 'Gaining knowledge through research...is not an abstract pursuit pursued but is meant to lead to transformative action in all of our relationships' (Baskin, 2011, p. 239). This emphasis on the relational extends to the traditional classroom and beyond, with Baskin arguing higher education institutions must engage with community at all levels, including vision, goals, curriculum, classroom practices, etc. in order to effect change (Baskin, 2011, p. 213). This accords with many of the central tenets of social innovation, including collaboration and inclusion, as well as engaging with those who are vulnerable and marginalized.

Indigenous approaches to education further resonate with social innovation in that from an Indigenous perspective, knowledge is not viewed as a commodity, but is the purview of everyone, and is to be shared for the common good (Baskin, 2011, p. 240).

In addition to revitalizing Indigenous knowledge and practices, and using them to inform social innovation partnerships between institutes of higher education and communities, Indigenous

social innovation can be used to further reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada. Hall and his colleagues provide an example of this in his description of course-based innovation at the University of Victoria. Briefly, the university collaborated with a community agency to develop curriculum that would enhance student understanding of the global refugee crisis. Based on experiential learning, the course drew on transformative learning theory and Indigenous pedagogy, including an introduction to the land by Dr Nick Claxton, a local Tsawout Indigenous scholar (Hall et al 2017, pp. 241-242).

### **3.6 Fostering Social Innovation in Higher Education**

#### **3.6.1 Conditions for Social Innovation**

As discussed earlier, there is strong impetus for institutes of higher education to leverage their resources to lead, or at the very least, get on board with, social innovation. There is also clear evidence of the positive outcomes resulting from higher education-community partnerships for student learning, communities, and institutions. The question is, what conditions need to be in place to foster social innovation in higher education institutions and enable it to flourish?

In addition to organizational conditions for leading transformational change such as establishing a sense of urgency, creating a vision, empowering others, and so on (see Kotter 1995), research suggests a number of conditions can help social innovation take root and flourish within higher education, including:

- An institution-wide commitment to engaging with, supporting and contributing to local and global development (Puukka, 2017; Murray et al, 2010; Pathways to Education, 2012)
- A strategy to build partnerships (Pathways to Education, 2012)
- Clearly-defined partnerships, including distinct roles, aims, success criteria, etc.
- The use of innovation incubators to facilitate the process (e.g. through provision of expertise, experts and experience, space, the means for upscaling and other support)
- Positioning of students as key players in the social innovation process (in order to build leadership skills and capacity)
- Autonomy for individuals, departments and faculties in terms of how they approach and implement social innovation (Hall et al, 2017, pp. 244-245)
- Opportunities for interdisciplinary teaching and learning linked to critical global issues (Hall et al, 2017, p. 245)

- Support for the development of community-based curriculum development (i.e. jointly-developed between academics and community organizations) (Hall et al, 2017, p. 245)
- Creation of problem- or issue-focused teaching and learning centres that cut across disciplinary boundaries (Hall et al, 2017, p. 245)
- Provision of spaces conducive to nurturing and empowering experimentation and innovation development, including e.g. incubators, accelerators, and labs (Strandberg 2017, p. 12)
- Creation of community university engagement offices or similar organizational structures that bring the engagement mission greater impact and better integration of research and teaching (Hall et al 2017, p. 245)
- Needs assessments conducted in partnership with communities (of technological, scientific and societal, cultural, environmental needs and development trajectories) (Puukka 2017, pp. 148-149)

Several institutions, as well as individuals, advocate mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the progress of social innovation initiatives (see e.g. European Commission, 2013: 17; Puukka, 2017; Pathways to Education, 2012). A strong counterargument may be found in the ‘Lessons Learnt’ of the JW McConnell Family Foundation Social Innovation Generation, however, which cautions that ‘conventional evaluation methods, which test outcomes against set objectives, can stifle innovation, which requires risk, experimentation, freedom to fail and the chance to learn from failure and the unexpected.’ (Social Innovation Generation, 2017).

### **3.6.2 Implementing Social Innovation**

Embedding social innovation in institutions of higher learning is not a straightforward process, and will vary according to institution aims, needs, and resources, among other factors. Examining approaches and frameworks will, however, provide insight into what is feasible, as well as what might best work.

Work being done by Westley and colleagues at the Waterloo Institute for Social Innovation and Resilience (WISIR), in collaboration with colleagues in Canada’s Social Innovation Generation (SiG) partnership and the MaRS Solutions Lab, attempts to support social innovation using a three-step process of developing, testing and instigating innovation strategies, named Social Innovation Labs (see the Social Innovation Lab Guide for details) (Westley et al, n.d.):

- Step 1: Initiation. Determines that a Social Innovation Lab process is the best approach to the problem.
- Step 2: Research and Preparation. Includes in-depth ethnographic research activities to help define the research question as well as collecting information on innovation and policy.
- Step 3: The Workshops. Series of three workshops, each with a specific focus.

Robin Murray and colleagues from The Young Foundation propose a framework for social innovation that includes six stages, from inception to impact, noting that the stages overlap and are not necessarily sequential (2010, p. 12). (See Murray et al 2010 for more detail on each stage).

- Stage 1: Prompts, inspirations and diagnoses. Includes elements that inform or initiate need for innovation (e.g. crisis, public spending cuts, new evidence), identification of the problem, and framing of the question.
- Stage 2: Proposals and ideas. Generation of ideas using formal and informal methods from a variety of sources.
- Stage 3: Prototyping and pilots. Ideas are put into practice both formally (e.g. prototypes, pilots, randomized controlled trials) and informally, and then refined.
- Stage 4: Sustaining. The idea becomes everyday practice through sharpening and streamlining. Income streams and other resources are identified, including budgets, teams, and legislation.
- Stage 5: Scaling and diffusion. Strategies for growing and spreading the innovation are implemented (though the authors caution that social innovations may take hold in other, more organic ways).
- Stage 6: Systemic change. The ultimate goal of social innovation, dependent on numerous factors, including economic viability.

In their comprehensive Framework for Community Service Learning (CLS) in Canada, Gemmel and Clayton propose taking a 'journalistic' or inquiry-based approach to establishing community service-learning initiatives, beginning with asking questions of each of the three key stakeholders or constituents: institutions (universities and colleges), students, and communities. As the authors point out, this approach helps provide clarity in terms of expectations, process, and relationships. Crucially, it also makes it clear that there may be different needs and/or agendas (Gemmel and Clayton, 2009, p. 11). The outcomes-based approach is then carried over into program design, with the intentional consideration and

balancing of each stakeholder's resources, needs and perspectives (Gemmel and Clayton, 2009, p. 13).

Finally, in her paper outlining how advanced education institutions can utilize their resources to support social innovation in Canada, Strandberg (2017, p. 21) sets out a comprehensive list of 'instruments for institutional engagement.' Recommendations for how each can be used to address social issues are also put forward. The resources are grouped into the following categories:

- Financial (e.g. investment, procurement, administration hiring)
- Research (e.g. research mandate, data, evidence and scientific information)
- Education (e.g. teaching mandate, faculty expertise, student expertise, social services)
- Relational (e.g. alumni relationships, future students, government, business, industry and community relationships, public policy and dialogue)
- Physical (e.g. facilities, cultural services, technology, land)

#### **4 Conclusion**

This paper has discussed, in broad terms, the relevance of social innovation to higher education, including some of the ways in which higher education institutions can harness and use their resources to meet the dual aims of preparing students for the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and the betterment of communities, nations, and the world. Applied learning is a particular focus, given its potential to advance both student learning and social outcomes. Indigenous approaches to education, with specific reference to social innovation and the emerging field of Indigenous social innovation, are also explored.

As colleges and universities use their considerable resources to collaborate with organizations and communities outside of academia to tackle social issues, the potential benefits to communities, the nation and the wider world in terms of tangibles such as enhanced living standards, more equitable wealth distribution, improved health outcomes, and so on are self-evident (Strandberg 2017, p. 11). Benefits to students are no less clear: opportunities to apply their learning in real-life situations to resolve social problems improves academic performance as well as specific skills and competencies, and promotes tolerance and compassion (see Astin et al, 2000; Gemmel and Clayton, 2009).

Institutes of higher education are heeding the call to go beyond their traditional purview of teaching and research to embrace and promote social innovation. The challenge lies in how best to direct their resources to foster a culture that facilitates this process. And while a number of models and frameworks exist, including those advocated by the University of Waterloo's Institute for Social Innovation and Resilience, the Young Foundation, and that of Community Service Learning, it is beyond the scope of this paper to go into the details of how higher education institutions might 'structure their operating systems to build social infrastructure, foster social innovation and further social progress...[and] play a pivotal role in accelerating society's transition to a more sustainable and just future for all.' (Strandberg 2017, p. 31).

In closing, it is worth considering the charge put to higher education by Stephen Huddart, President and CEO of the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation (2017, p. 7):

...In the era of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, social innovation shares a special responsibility with philanthropy, to respectfully engage in the patient, fundamental work of shifting cultures — beginning with decolonizing itself...this is a time when settler culture — and that includes social innovators — needs to step back to make room for, and learn from, Indigenous innovation. This includes social innovation labs (Winnipeg Boldness); impact investing funds (Raven Indigenous Impact Fund); new educational models (Dechinta); transformative social enterprises (Aki Energy); solutions to large-scale challenges like housing on reserves (ABSCAN); and restructured relationships (Canadians for a New Partnership, 4R's). This is just the beginning, and from this beginning, there are profound lessons. (Huddart, 2017, p. 7)

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