



POLICY 9.25

POSITION POLICY

Access to Education for Indigenous Learners in Canada

POLICY INTENT

To outline the position of AUSU regarding the removal of barriers to access that Indigenous learners experience while pursuing post-secondary education.

POLICY RESPONSIBILITY

AUSU Council

POLICY RESEARCH

Athabasca University (AU) offers open and distance education, which allows for individuals to participate in post-secondary education without geographic barriers. Athabasca University's mandate includes improving accessibility to Indigenous learners (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit) so they may pursue and complete undergraduate or graduate studies.¹ Despite that this is included in the mandate of Athabasca University, Indigenous learners still experience many barriers to accessing post-secondary education in Canada. As an institution of higher learning, Athabasca University has a responsibility to both help educate its learners on Indigenous issues in Canada as well as remove barriers to access for Indigenous learners broadly.²

As the Indian Act developed through colonial legislation in the 19th century, emphasis was placed on enfranchisement of Indigenous Peoples. In order for Indigenous individuals to become enfranchised, they would have to leave their home communities, which were designated as reservations through the Indian Act, and lose their First Nations status, and therefore access to any provisions they were owed by that Act. This emphasis on enfranchisement, along with programs designed to promote cultural genocide such as Residential Schools, the 60's Scoop and Millennial Scoop, worked to the long-term goal of the Indian Act – to eradicate Indigenous Peoples from Canada altogether. This history, spanning back through the past 500 years, has worked to create disparity in Canadian society for Indigenous people.³ The intergenerational abuse, lateral violence, and systemic racism and discrimination that Indigenous Peoples face as a product of the colonization of Canada has left a lasting impact that is experienced to this day. The last residential school in Canada was closed in 1996, only a single generation ago.⁴ The reality of the impacts of colonization takes many forms, including accessibility to post-secondary education. The barriers to accessing post-secondary can take many forms for Indigenous individuals.

Indigenous learners in Canada have lower rates of completion in the education system, so that only 41% of Indigenous students who live on a reservation have graduated high school (compared with 77% of the general Canadian population)⁵ and only 39% of Indigenous peoples from age 25-64 have obtained post-secondary education credential in Canada⁶, and only approximately 5% have achieved a university-level credential.⁷ Education is the key to economic success in contemporary society, so this disparity indicates an issue when considering long-term economic outcomes for Canada's Indigenous peoples. Students may choose to opt out of western-style education systems due to fear, confusion, or mistrust in institutions that harken to generations of colonial activity, but there are also a number of systemic

barriers. These barriers include lack of financial resources; academic preparedness for post-secondary; absence of role models with post-secondary education; racism and discrimination on campus; transportation challenges; family health issues; institutional administrative barriers such as complex processes for admissions; and displacement from communities.⁸ Indigenous learners often are not culturally prepared to engage in Westernized educational processes and find Indigenous ways of knowing in the holistic sense are not acknowledged in the traditional post-secondary setting.

Learners at AU may not have the same types of geographical barriers as those who attend physical campuses, but there are other barriers faced by Indigenous students that are not solved by this virtue alone. Transition activities into Athabasca University should be adequate, culturally relevant, and well supported for Indigenous learners who wish to pursue post-secondary studies but who have struggled with the transition between high school to post-secondary. Geographic barriers indeed exist for those in Northern communities where internet access may be challenging or impossible to obtain, or who need to travel for science labs or other scholastic endeavours.

In order to create a more Indigenous campus, Indigenous individuals should be present in decision-making and implementational capacities within the institution, as well as within research, including involvement of Indigenous students as Athabasca University carries out the Nukskahtowin Strategic Plan [citation needed].⁹ The academy should be open to and make active strides toward Indigenous the academy. These movements toward reconciliation within the governance of the institution itself will promote the decolonization of education for Indigenous learners and help to provide education that is free of discrimination, culturally relevant, holistic and integrated – the basis for Indigenous Ways of Knowing.¹⁰ The academy should also be open to Indigenous research practices that fall outside the Western view.

These steps toward creating a better environment for Indigenous students in Canada are not the only path we must take to close the gap in higher education amongst Canada's Indigenous population. Financial barriers represent one of the largest barriers to accessing education and is considered to be a right by First Nations people¹¹, and do not only cover the costs of tuition.¹² The Government of Canada, however, does not fund post-secondary education for every eligible First Nations individual. In fact, the Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP), which has had a 2% funding cap since 1996, is a policy-based approach to funding First Nations and Inuit individuals¹³ that has a huge funding backlog; In 2008 the disparity in funding resulted in around \$425 million that was required but not funded for First Nations and Inuit learners.¹⁴ As well as this funding disparity, there currently is no robust funding program to support Métis students in pursuing post-secondary education.¹⁵ In light of 7% tuition increases across the board in 2020¹⁶, Athabasca University can respond to this directly by creating grants and bursaries aimed at financially supporting Indigenous learners, who are often dealing with multiple barriers to education.

Once Indigenous learners are registered at AU and part of the student community, it is important and necessary to ensure they have access to appropriate cultural community spaces. Athabasca University Nukskahtowin is the institution's centre for Indigenous individuals, but it lacks access to resources from the institution to continue to grow and support the space and the learners who may seek it out.

Athabasca University utilizes the concept of reciprocity within their IMAGINE strategic plan in the context of Indigenous worldview.¹⁷ The concept of reciprocity is the underlying basis of the Treaties

Indigenous peoples entered into during colonization,¹⁸ and as an institution holding power within this colonial framework it is integral AU is held to this standard in all of their decisions.

In contemporary Canadian Indigenous society, education is looked at with the same attitude by Indigenous Elders as they once did the bison.¹⁹ Education is a means to survival and a gift from the creator, and the systemic barriers to its access within a colonial framework only serve to further the socioeconomic divide Indigenous peoples face in Canada. It is the responsibility of those who hold power in these colonial systems to make change and to begin to dismantle the colonial structures that promote this divide. In order to promote this and implement it through positive feedback, the institution can work to increase education and awareness amongst non-Indigenous Canadians, who show an overall lack of understanding or knowledge of Indigenous issues in Canada.²⁰ To increase this knowledge and awareness in an effort to promote reconciliation, Athabasca University can implement the requirement that all students must complete a course centring on the history of Indigenous Peoples in Canada and its subsequent colonization.²¹

Be it resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) to improve accessibility to Indigenous learners in part by providing more funding through grants and bursaries to indigenous students; include more Indigenous individuals in decision-making, implementation and research in the institution; addressing geographic barriers such as lack of internet connection to Northern communities; improve the resources to Nukskahtowin and culturally appropriate spaces; decolonization efforts within the academy including the promotion of Indigenous-lead research; and mandatory indigenous study courses for program students.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University to accept and implement the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action as it relates to post-secondary education, specifically to create degree programs in Aboriginal languages, take steps to educate faculty and staff on how to integrate Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods into curricula, and to contribute to a national research program with multi-year funding to advance understanding of reconciliation.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University to accept and implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and dedicate our institution to recognizing Indigenous peoples have a right to control and access educational systems, and to have such provided in their own language, and that Indigenous peoples have the right to the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations which shall be appropriately reflected in Athabasca University curricula.

POLICY HISTORY

Original Approval Date: March 19, 2020
Last Review Date: August 2020
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- ¹ Athabasca University. (n.d.). Mission and Mandate. Retrieved from athabascau.ca on February 7, 2020: <https://www.athabascau.ca/aboutau/mission/>
- ² Mitchell, T., D. Thomas, and J. Smith. "Unsettling the Settlers: Principals of a Decolonial Approach to Creating Safe(r) Spaces in Post-Secondary Education." *American Journal of Community Psychology* 62 (Dec 2018), pp. 350-368.
- ³ McGregor, D. "From 'Decolonized' to Reconciliation Research in Canada: Drawing From Indigenous Research Paradigms." *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 17, no. 3 (2017), pp. 810-831.
- ⁴ Union of Ontario Indians. (2013). An Overview of the Indian Residential School System. Retrieved from anishinabek.ca: <http://www.anishinabek.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/An-Overview-of-the-IRS-System-Booklet.pdf>
- ⁵ Ottmann, J. "Canada's Indigenous Peoples' Access to Post-Secondary Education: The Spirit of the 'New Buffalo.'" *Indigenous Pathways, Transitions, and Participation in Higher Education: From Policy to Practice*. (New York, NY: Springer Open, 2017), pp. 95-117.
- ⁶ Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation. (September 2005). Improving Aboriginal Access to Post-Secondary Education in Canada. Retrieved from carleton.ca: https://library.carleton.ca/sites/default/files/find/data/surveys/pdf_files/millennium_2005-09_rn-2_en.pdf
- ⁷ Assembly of First Nations. (n.d.). Fact Sheet: First Nations Post-Secondary Education. Retrieved from afn.ca on February 7, 2020: <https://www.afn.ca/uploads/files/pse-fact-sheet.pdf>
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 110.
- ⁹ Athabasca University. (2020). Nukskahtowin – Meeting Place: Strategic Plan 2020. Retrieved from Athabasca.ca: <http://indigenous.athabascau.ca/>.
- ¹⁰ McGregor, D. "From 'Decolonized' to Reconciliation Research in Canada: Drawing From Indigenous Research Paradigms." pp. 810-831.
- ¹¹ Ottmann, J. "Canada's Indigenous Peoples' Access to Post-Secondary Education: The Spirit of the 'New Buffalo.'", p. 114.
- ¹² Thompson, K. and G. Hill-MacDonald. *First Nations Post-Secondary Education Review*. (Ottawa, ON: Assembly of First Nations, July 2, 2018), p. 23.
- ¹³ Ottmann, J. "Canada's Indigenous Peoples' Access to Post-Secondary Education: The Spirit of the 'New Buffalo.'", p. 115.
- ¹⁴ Athabasca University Students' Union. (December 2019). AUSU Response Regarding AU Tuition Change. Retrieved from ausu.org: <https://www.ausu.org/2019/12/ausu-response-regarding-au-tuition-change/>
- ¹⁵ Russell, N. Federal funding for Métis post-secondary education shuts out Métis settlements, says governing body. (Ottawa, ON: Hill Times, June 19, 2019).
- ¹⁶ Ottmann, J. "Canada's Indigenous Peoples' Access to Post-Secondary Education: The Spirit of the 'New Buffalo.'", p. 115.
- ¹⁷ Athabasca University. (2018). *Imagine: Transforming Lives, Transforming Communities*. Retrieved from athabascau.ca: <http://imagine.athabascau.ca/>.
- ¹⁸ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. *What we Have Learned: Principals of Truth and Reconciliation*. (Winnipeg, MN: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), p. 23.
- ¹⁹ Ottmann, J. "Canada's Indigenous Peoples' Access to Post-Secondary Education: The Spirit of the 'New Buffalo.'", p. 97.
- ²⁰ Schaeffli, L., A. Godlewska, L. Korteweg, A. Coombs, L. Morcom, and J. Rose. "What Do First-Year University Students in Ontario, Canada, Know about First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples and Topics?" *Canadian Journal of Education/Revue Canadienne De l'éducation* 41 vol. 3 (2018), pp. 688-725.

²¹ McGregor, D. "From 'Decolonized' to Reconciliation Research in Canada: Drawing From Indigenous Research Paradigms." p. 823.