



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 RESEARCH

Athabasca University's (AU) open distance model of education allows individuals to participate in post-secondary education without barriers that a traditional brick and mortar institution may pose. In particular, AU's mandate includes improving accessibility for Indigenous learners (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit) so they may pursue and complete undergraduate or graduate studies.¹ Despite inclusion in this mandate, Indigenous learners still experience significant barriers to accessing post-secondary education in Canada. As an institution of higher learning, AU has a responsibility to remove barriers to access for Indigenous learners, as well as to help educate all learners on Indigenous issues in Canada.²

Of particular significance to this policy is research into the Royal Proclamation of 1763, a "document that set[s] out guidelines for European settlement of Aboriginal territories in what is now North America." Issued by King George III to claim North American territory for Britain, the Proclamation "explicitly states that Aboriginal title has existed and continues to exist, and that all land would be considered Aboriginal land until ceded by treaty."³ It also forbids "settlers from claiming land from the Aboriginal occupants, unless it has been first bought by the Crown and then sold to the settlers. The Royal Proclamation further sets out that only the Crown can buy land from First Nations."⁴ It is important to note that this Proclamation was written by British colonists without Indigenous communities' input.⁵ Many "Indigenous and legal scholars recognize the Royal Proclamation as an important first step toward the recognition of existing Aboriginal rights and title, including the right to self-determination."⁶ As we have seen throughout the years, these prohibitions, agreements, and treaties have not been honoured.⁷

In particular, European settler expansion continued following Confederation in 1867, often, without consultation from Indigenous communities.⁸ In addition, colonial legislation, such as the Indian Act developed during the 19th century, placed emphasis on enfranchisement of Indigenous Peoples. Enfranchisement can be defined as a government-mandated "legal [assimilation] process for terminating a person's Indian status and conferring full Canadian citizenship."⁹ This meant that 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, in turn, access to any provisions they were owed by this Act. In particular, the Act detrimentally affected Indigenous women, who would become enfranchised if they married a non-Indigenous man. Their children would also become enfranchised. Enfranchisement also applied to Indigenous individuals who obtained a university degree, or joined the medical or legal professions until 1920.¹⁰ This emphasis on assimilation into European settler culture, along with programs designed to

promote genocide, such as Residential Schools, the 60's Scoop, and the Millennial Scoop, worked with government policies and legislation—to eradicate Indigenous Peoples from Canada altogether.

The Indian Act has undergone many changes throughout the years. In 1969, former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau introduced the White Paper designed to eliminate the Indian Act. This was rejected by many Indigenous communities, who believed that assimilation “into mainstream Canadian society was not the means to achieve equality.”¹¹ The Act remains a controversial piece of legislation to this day. On one hand, it has been described as apartheid by the Assembly of First Nations and as an example of human rights abuse by Amnesty International, the United Nations, and the Canadian Human Rights Commission.¹² However, many individuals do not support its abolishment based on its historical and legal significance, as it “legally distinguishes between First Nations and other Canadians, and acknowledges that the federal government has a unique relationship with, and obligation to, First Nations.”¹³ As stated by Harold Cardinal, Cree writer, political leader, and lawyer, “No just society and no society with even pretensions to being just can long tolerate such a piece of legislation, but we would rather continue to live in bondage under the inequitable Indian Act than surrender our sacred rights. Any time the government wants to honour its obligations to us we are more than happy to help devise new Indian legislation.”¹⁴

Despite a rich history prior to first contact,¹⁵ the legacy of colonialism has worked to create disparity in Canadian society for Indigenous Peoples.¹⁶ In particular, the intergenerational abuse, lateral violence, and systemic racism and discrimination that Indigenous Peoples face is a result of the colonization of Canada and continues to this day. For instance, the last Residential School in Canada was closed in 1996, only a single generation ago.¹⁷ In recent times, the result of these government policies have become impossible to ignore, with growing numbers of unmarked Indigenous children's graves unearthed in many of these former Residential Schools, including those at Cowessess First Nation, Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc Nation, Sioux Valley Dakota Nation, Muskowekwan First Nation, and ʔaq'am First Nation,¹⁸ with many more in process.

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. 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.

These effects are also noticeable in post-secondary education. For example, Indigenous learners in Canada have lower rates of completion in the education system; only 41% of Indigenous students who live on a reserves have graduated high school (compared with 77% of the general Canadian population),¹⁹ only 39% of Indigenous peoples from age 25–64 have obtained post-secondary education credential in Canada,²⁰ and only approximately 5% have achieved a university-level credential.²¹ Education is one of the ways to economic success in contemporary society, so this disparity indicates an issue when considering long-term economic outcomes for Indigenous Peoples in Canada. Indigenous students may opt out of these Eurocentric-style education systems due to fear, confusion, or mistrust in institutions as a result of generations of colonial activity, but there are also a number of ongoing 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.²² Often, Indigenous learners

are not culturally prepared to engage in Eurocentric educational processes and find Indigenous Ways of Knowing in the holistic sense are not acknowledged in the traditional post-secondary setting.

In addition, Two-Spirit (2S) learners may face additional barriers in the post-secondary sphere, as well as in their personal and professional lives.²³ The term Two-Spirit was introduced in 1990 by Elder Myra Laramie at the 3rd annual Native American and Canadian Aboriginal LGBT peoples gathering in Winnipeg, Manitoba. It is an “umbrella term that points to the important roles that Two Spirit people held prior to colonization” and “is a direct acknowledgement of the disruption of Two Spirit teachings that took place when first contact between Indigenous peoples and settlers was made and the ongoing impact of colonization.”²⁴

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 AU 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 from high school to post-secondary. Geographic barriers indeed exist for those in Northern and rural communities where Internet access may be challenging or impossible to obtain, or who need to travel for science labs, practicums, co-op placements, or other scholastic endeavours.

AU should make active strides toward Indigenizing the institution. In order to create a more Indigenized campus, Indigenous individuals should be able to provide consultation for and be present in decision-making and implementation capacities within the institution, as well as within research. Consultations should be equitably compensated. 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, is culturally relevant, and is holistic and integrated—the basis for Indigenous Ways of Knowing.²⁵ The institution should also be open to Indigenized research practices that fall outside the Eurocentric view.

These steps toward creating a better environment for Indigenous learners are not the only path we must take to close the gap in higher education amongst the Indigenous population in Canada. Financial barriers represent one of the largest obstacles to accessing education, which is a right by First Nations Peoples²⁶ and should not only cover the costs of tuition.²⁷ 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 individuals²⁸ 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.²⁹ As well as this funding disparity, there currently is no robust funding program to support Métis students in pursuing post-secondary education.³⁰ In light of 7% tuition increases across the board in 2020,³¹ Athabasca University can respond to this directly by creating grants and bursaries aimed at financially supporting Indigenous learners, who are often dealing with multiple systemic 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. At AU, Nuksahtowin is a 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.

AU utilizes the concept of reciprocity within their IMAGINE Strategic Plan in the context of Indigenous worldview.³² The concept of reciprocity is the underlying basis of the Treaties Indigenous Peoples entered into during colonization,³³ 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 certain contemporary Indigenous societies in Canada, Indigenous Elders often view education as they once did the bison.³⁴ This means that 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 create change and to begin to dismantle the colonial structures that promote this divide. In order to promote this change and implement it through positive feedback, the institution can work to increase education and awareness amongst non-Indigenous settler Canadians, who show an overall lack of understanding or knowledge of Indigenous issues in Canada.³⁵ To increase this knowledge and awareness in an effort to promote reconciliation, AU can implement the requirement that all students must complete a course centring on the history of Indigenous Peoples in Canada and its subsequent colonization,³⁶ as well as promoting Indigenous language study.

In addition to this type of education and awareness, AU should implement and educate all its learners about the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) Final Report "Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future"³⁷ and as well as the Calls to Actions provided in its Final Report, as it relates to the post-secondary sphere.³⁸ AU should also strive to implement and educate its learners on the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which enshrines the rights that 'constitute the minimum standards for the survival, dignity and well-being of the indigenous peoples of the world.'"³⁹

Be it resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) to improve accessibility to Indigenous learners by providing more funding through grants and bursaries for Indigenous students; including more Indigenous individuals in decision-making through consultation, implementation and research in the institution; addressing geographic barriers such as lack of Internet connection to Northern, rural, and remote communities; improving the resources to Nukskahtowin, providing culturally appropriate spaces; improving decolonization efforts within the institution including the promotion of Indigenous-lead research; and implementing 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, 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 recognize Indigenous Peoples have a right to self-determination, including but not limited to, control and access of educational systems, and to have such provided in

their own languages, and the right to the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations, which shall be appropriately reflected in Athabasca University curricula.

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