



UNIVERSITY OF
SASKATCHEWAN

Phase 4 Report

ohpahotân | oohpaahotaan: The Gift — Past, Present, and Future

President's Portfolio

BE WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS

Purpose and Context

This report reflects on our ongoing institutional journey toward Truth and Reconciliation and transformation at the University of Saskatchewan from the perspective of the president's office and the units that comprise the president's portfolio, including governance, strategic finance, government relations, legal, and sustainability. Grounded in *ohpahotân | oohpaahotaan: The Gift – Past, Present and Future*, it reflects on how the university, at its highest level, has come to understand our responsibilities, how we have begun to respond, and how we must continue to evolve. Central to this work is the understanding that Truth and Reconciliation is not a discrete initiative but a sustained commitment to reshape structures, policies, practices, and relationships in foundational ways.

The report reflects not only on what has been done and why, but on what has been learned, and how those learnings can shape future action.

The Impetus for Change

The foundation for this work is wide-ranging but begins primarily in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Calls to Action, released in 2015. In response, the University of Saskatchewan organized the first of what has become an annual national forum for post-secondary institutions on Truth and Reconciliation. The forum brought together leaders in Canadian universities, Indigenous leaders, students, and scholars to discuss how universities can respond to the TRC Calls to Action. As a part of this forum, all post-secondary institutions in Saskatchewan committed to closing the education gap for Indigenous students.

In 2018, the University of Saskatchewan UPlan 2025 was gifted the name *nīkānītān manācihitowinihk* in Cree and *ni manachihitoonaan* in Michif by Indigenous communities, which translates as "Let us lead with respect." That plan articulated an aspiration to undertake transformative decolonization leading to reconciliation:

"The world needs a university in which Indigenous concepts, methodologies, pedagogies, languages, and philosophies are respectfully woven into the tapestry of learning, research, scholarship, creativity, and community engagement."

As part of the University of Saskatchewan's journey towards Truth and Reconciliation, the President, Provost, and Vice-Provost Indigenous Engagement of the day undertook a consultation in 2021 with Indigenous faculty and staff to gain insights on the perceptions and experiences of working at the University of Saskatchewan as an Indigenous person. The consultation revealed

experiences of racism, persistent barriers within institutional systems, and a sense of fatigue arising from repeated engagement without meaningful change.

Participants described environments where safety and belonging were not consistently present, where Indigenous faculty and staff carried disproportionate burdens to educate others, and where institutional processes—including hiring, retention, tenure, and promotion—did not fully recognize or support Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and doing.

Importantly, the consultations made clear that incremental or symbolic actions are not enough. What is needed is meaningful, action-oriented change rooted in accountability, with Indigenous voices embedded in decision-making from the outset.

Finally, the university community experienced a collective wound when a well-known and celebrated scholar in Indigenous health who proclaimed to be Indigenous was revealed to have no Indigenous ancestry. This revelation, which came to light two months after *ohpahotân | oohpaahotaan: The Gift — Past, Present, and Future* was gifted in a ceremony in the university's bowl in August 2021, was deeply painful for our campus community.

Taken together, all of this has demonstrated a need to look inward, identify the systems, processes and attitudes that need to change.

Responding to the Call

Recognizing that addressing systemic racism and advancing Truth and Reconciliation requires both immediate and sustained action, one of the most visible and significant efforts made by the president's office was the establishment of the Special Advisor to the President on Anti-Racism and Anti-Oppression. Dr. Verna St. Denis agreed to take on this role, which she held from January 2021 to January 2025.

Dr. St. Denis, along with Liz Duret, senior diversity and inclusion consultant in the human resources department, developed and delivered a series of structured, facilitated sessions with senior leadership. This initiative created space for reflection, learning, and dialogue. Leaders were introduced to the language and frameworks necessary to understand racism and oppression and were challenged to apply these insights to their own roles and decision-making processes. The intent was not simply to deliver training, but to cultivate a deeper, ongoing educational journey that would influence institutional culture and practice.

Leaders demonstrated genuine engagement and a desire to learn, but it also became evident that foundational knowledge in anti-racism and anti-oppression was uneven, and that sustained effort would be required to build capacity across the institution. The sessions underscored that meaningful change depends not only on individual understanding, but on the ability to translate that understanding into action, including policies, processes, and everyday practices that reflect an anti-racist and anti-oppressive lens.

In parallel with the leadership-focused work of the Special Advisor, units across the president's portfolio have contributed to advancing Truth and Reconciliation through their respective mandates.

Within the Legal Office, noteworthy progress has been made in embedding anti-racism and Indigenous-informed approaches into institutional policy and labour relations. Legal counsel played a significant role in advancing *deybwewin | taapwaywin | tapwewin* – the Indigenous Truth Policy, particularly in relation to Indigenous citizenship and membership. The Legal Office has also supported broader institutional transformation through work with Human Resources and Faculty Relations to integrate equity, diversity, and inclusion principles into hiring practices and agreements. Notably, collective agreement negotiations resulted in landmark advances, including mandatory anti-racism training, the establishment of an Indigenous faculty advocate role in tenure and promotion, dedicated leave for traditional Indigenous ceremonies, and tuition waivers for Indigenous language courses.

At the same time, the Legal Office has engaged in relationship-building and systems change through collaboration with the Office of the Vice-Provost Indigenous Engagement and the Indigenous Law Centre, and the integration of Indigenous perspectives into conflict engagement practices.

The Strategic Finance Office has supported Truth and Reconciliation in ways that reflect respect for Indigenous cultural practices and relationships. This includes facilitating culturally appropriate financial processes, such as honoraria for Elders, drummers, and community members participating in university ceremonies and events, ensuring that these contributions are recognized and supported in meaningful ways. In addition, the office has engaged in anti-racism and anti-oppression training and continues to explore ways to embed Indigenous recognition into everyday practices, including land acknowledgements within financial and administrative settings.

The Governance Office has contributed by strengthening institutional governance structures and processes to better reflect Indigenous perspectives and participation. This has included incorporating Indigenous symbols and protocols into convocation ceremonies, enhancing Indigenous visibility and inclusion within institutional traditions, and working with governance bodies to embed equity, diversity, and inclusion considerations into appointments and decision-making processes. Collaboration with the Office of the Vice-Provost Indigenous Engagement has also supported more culturally informed approaches to student appeals and governance practices.

The Sustainability Office has actively advanced Indigenous perspectives within sustainability initiatives by amplifying Indigenous voices, knowledge, and partnerships across programming, reporting, and engagement. This includes hosting nationally recognized speakers, as well as organizing public lectures highlighting Indigenous rights, gender equality, and climate impacts on Indigenous communities. Efforts to embed Indigenous knowledge in Sustainability Progress Reports, campus tours, and educational programming are ongoing, while explicitly recognizing

Indigenous contributions through frameworks like UNDRIP and ohpahotân | oohpaahotaan: The Gift. Strong partnerships have also been cultivated, notably with Mistawasis Nehiyawak to co-host a national climate adaptation meeting in 2024, and with the Métis Nation–Saskatchewan through student engagement initiatives like EcoHack 2026.

The Government Relations Office worked with the Office of the Vice-Provost Indigenous Engagement to socialize deybawin | taapwaywin | tapwewin – the Indigenous Truth Policy with government officials, helping to ensure policymakers understand and support this important work.

Through these efforts, it becomes evident that advancing Truth and Reconciliation requires coordinated action across diverse functional areas, each contributing to broader institutional transformation.

What Has Been Learned

As we reflect on the last decade or so, it has become clear that building trust and effecting change requires action with tangible outcomes and accountability. Additionally, the work of Truth and Reconciliation cannot be approached as a finite task or a completed checklist. This work is a continuous process of education, reflection, and adaptation.

The university has learned that systems change must be holistic. Addressing individual attitudes without transforming institutional structures will not lead to lasting change. Similarly, changes to policy must be accompanied by shifts in culture, leadership practices, and relationships.

The importance of Indigenous voice and leadership has been reaffirmed. The principle of “nothing about us without us” remains central, and the institution has learned that meaningful progress requires Indigenous perspectives to be present not at the margins, but at the core of decision-making processes.

Another key learning is that meaningful progress is often grounded in operational and relational practices that may not initially appear transformative, but which collectively reshape institutional culture. For example, supporting Indigenous ceremonies through financial processes, incorporating Indigenous protocol into governance practices, and embedding Indigenous considerations into legal frameworks all contribute to a broader environment of respect, inclusion, and accountability. These actions demonstrate that reconciliation is enacted not only through strategy and leadership, but through everyday institutional practices across all portfolios.

Looking Forward: Commitments for the Next Phase

Building on these learnings, the next phase of this work will be defined by a shift from foundational learning to deeper integration and sustained transformation.

A key priority is to strengthen the role of Indigenous knowledge and guidance within leadership structures. This includes facilitating more intentional engagement between the Wise Ones and

senior leaders, ensuring Indigenous perspectives are heard by leadership and influence institutional decision-making in meaningful ways.

At the same time, dedicated leadership is required to guide this work at a strategic level. The president's office has hired a Senior Strategic Advisor on Truth and Reconciliation for the 2026-27 academic year, who will work to ensure our commitment to Truth and Reconciliation is embedded within the development of a new institutional strategic plan. Key to achieving this is directly engaging with Indigenous communities in a way that strengthens and sustains relationships into the future. The new university strategy must reflect an understanding that Truth and Reconciliation is lived through respectful, reciprocal, and sustained engagement. This work will be embedded within the new strategic plan, ensuring alignment between institutional priorities and community relationships.

Looking ahead, units across the president's portfolio will continue to deepen their contributions to reconciliation through both strategic and operational commitments.

- The Governance Office has identified opportunities to further embed Indigenous governance principles into institutional decision-making structures and to strengthen Indigenous presence in ceremonies, policies, and naming practices.
- The Office of Sustainability has committed to expanding partnerships with Indigenous communities, increasing the visibility of Indigenous knowledge in sustainability initiatives, and exploring ways to better measure the impact of these efforts.
- The Strategic Finance Office will continue to integrate Indigenous recognition into financial and administrative practices.
- The Legal Office will build on its work to align institutional policies, agreements, and conflict engagement approaches with Indigenous perspectives and anti-racism commitments. The Legal Office is committing to continuing to attend symposiums and learning events on campus focused on Truth and Reconciliation, Indigenous perspectives, and relationship-building, and to continue to explore ways of integrating conflict engagement theory with Indigenous wisdom, teachings, and relational approaches to community care.
- The Government Relations Office will continue to support the Office of the Vice-Provost Indigenous Engagement in its engagement with Indigenous governments.

Embodying the Seven Fundamental Commitments

The President's Portfolio demonstrates its alignment with the seven fundamental commitments of *ohpahotân oohpaahotaan: The Gift* through both reflective analysis and concrete institutional actions.

Initiatives such as anti-racism and anti-oppression sessions for senior leadership work to build **safety** in organizational cultures by increasing awareness, accountability, and responsiveness in

decision-making. This work also supports **wellbeing** by addressing the structural sources of stress and inequity.

Truth and reconciliation must influence policies, decision-making processes, and institutional priorities, reflecting a commitment to responsible leadership that honours obligations to Indigenous peoples, knowledge systems, and the broader community. **Stewardship** is reflected in how institutional systems responsibly support Indigenous priorities and relationships. For example, the Strategic Finance Office's work to enable culturally appropriate financial practices—such as honoraria for Elders and cultural contributors—demonstrates stewardship through respectful resource allocation. Similarly, the Office of Sustainability has advanced stewardship by promoting Indigenous knowledge within sustainability education and programming, including national symposium participation, public lectures, and the integration of Indigenous perspectives into sustainability reporting and campus initiatives.

The commitment to engage the Wise Ones within senior leadership structures and the recognition that Indigenous perspectives must be present at the core of institutional governance are examples of **representation**. The commitment to representation is advanced through both governance and institutional structures. As an example, the Governance Office has worked to strengthen Indigenous representation within decision-making bodies, including embedding EDI considerations into governance appointments and increasing Indigenous presence in ceremonial and institutional spaces. In parallel, legal frameworks and collective agreements have been strengthened to support Indigenous faculty representation and advocacy within tenure and promotion processes.

The commitment to **right relations** is evident in both institutional and community-based engagement. The Office of Sustainability has built meaningful partnerships with Indigenous communities, such as collaboration with Mistawasis Nehiyawak and the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan, supporting initiatives that bring Indigenous leaders, youth, and students together in shared learning and action. These efforts reflect a commitment to reciprocity, trust-building, and long-term relationship development beyond the university.

Within the institution, the Legal Office's work in conflict engagement and cross-cultural dialogue further supports respectful relationships grounded in understanding and Indigenous-informed approaches to community care.

Creation is demonstrated through the development of new roles, structures, and approaches that support institutional transformation. Examples include the establishment of the Special Advisor on Anti-Racism and Anti-Oppression and the Senior Special Advisor on Truth and Reconciliation. These initiatives reflect innovative approaches to embedding Indigenous knowledge into leadership, policy, and strategic planning.

Finally, the shift toward deeper integration, embedding reconciliation into the institution's strategic plan and long-term priorities, demonstrates **renewal** through a forward-looking approach focused on growth, accountability, and lasting systemic change.

Continuing the Journey

This report marks an important moment in the university's journey to move from truth-telling toward sustained action. Of course, this journey is far from complete. The work of Truth and Reconciliation is continuous and requires ongoing reflection, humility, and commitment. It challenges the institution not only to change what it does, but to reconsider how it understands itself and its role within broader systems.

Guided by *ohpahotân* | *oohpaahotaan*, the University of Saskatchewan continues forward with a renewed sense of responsibility and purpose—committed to building relationships, transforming systems, and creating a future grounded in respect and reciprocity.