

# **Evaluating USask's Institutional Accountability to *ohpahotân* | *oohpaahotaan* and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action in Post-Secondary Education**

## **Introduction**

Five years have passed since Elders, Knowledge Keepers, students, staff, faculty, and senior leadership gathered in the Bowl at the University of Saskatchewan (USask) to receive the *ohpahotân* | *oohpaahotaan* USask's Indigenous Strategy, meaning "let's fly up together." The strategy was created by and with Indigenous peoples and communities and presented to the university as a gift with the responsibility of upholding and stewarding the commitments. Receiving this gift established a commitment across the institution to steward the strategy with reciprocity, respect, and responsibility, ultimately leading to accountability (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991). This moment marked the beginning of a long-term process of institutional change as the strategy set out a path toward Indigenization, decolonization, and reconciliation through seven fundamental commitments: safety, wellness, stewardship, representation, right relations, creation, and renewal. This process reflects broader national conversations about how universities can move beyond symbolic inclusion toward deeper institutional transformation (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018). These commitments are not simply aspirational values. They require structural and systemic transformation across teaching, research, governance, and community relationships.

Evaluating the strategy after five years allows the institution to reflect on where progress has been made, where barriers remain, and how the university must continue to evolve to meet its responsibilities to Indigenous peoples, communities, and nations. This evaluation is also part of the broader national responsibility outlined in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Calls to Action, particularly those directed toward post-secondary institutions. These

actions and commitments will push us to remain accountable to the communities we serve, uphold the Calls to Action, and create a space which uplifts, celebrates, and champions Indigenous people's knowledge systems and Ways of Knowing at every level.

## **Purpose of Evaluation**

Universities are not neutral spaces. Canadian post-secondary institutions have historically been complicit in colonial systems that marginalized Indigenous knowledge, languages, and peoples (Battiste, 2013; Smith, 2012). Addressing this history requires intentional accountability and ongoing reflection. Evaluation is therefore not simply a technical exercise. It is an act of truth-telling. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission emphasized that reconciliation cannot occur without confronting the realities of the past and the present (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Over the past five years, the strategy has generated significant engagement across the university community. Phase one presentations reached more than 120 units and stakeholders across campus. Phase two consultations involved every college and school, along with individual units, through more than 80 meetings. Ten strategy symposiums have been hosted with registrations reaching over 250 participants each time. The Wise Ones Circle has consistently provided guidance and cultural grounding for implementation. The Wise Ones circle is represented by 12 Elders, Knowledge Keepers, Knowledge Holders who bring their distinct knowledge systems to guide the direction of Office of the Vice-Provost Indigenous Engagement (OVPIE) and the work would not go on without this decision-making involvement. The strategy webpage has been visited nearly 8500 times since its refresh in October 2023, and the updated strategy document has been downloaded more than 2500 times since August 2023. Phase three requested each unit to prepare a presentation delivered to the Office of the Vice Provost, Indigenous Engagement demonstrating their commitment to implementing the strategy.

The intentions of these presentations were to support and encourage implementing and promoting the strategy through student support services, academics, retention and recruitment of Indigenous staff and faculty, research with and by Indigenous people, etc. This phase coincided with Phase four for many colleges, schools and units at USask.

Phase four offered the opportunity to share success stories and model stewardship of the gift. Consultations and data collection will measure the lasting impact each phase has created by assessing the actions that have been made to implement critical change. During this process, the goal is to identify tangible markers because of the work that has been done to adopt *ohpahotân | oohpaahotaan*. This phase guides the University of Saskatchewan toward [\*transformative decolonization leading to reconciliation\*](#). These engagements reflect an institutional willingness to participate in dialogue and reflection; however, participation does not constitute change. The purpose of this evaluation is to examine how engagement has translated into systemic and structural shifts that improve the experiences of Indigenous students, staff, faculty, and communities at USask. The structural shifts are results of holistically integrating the seven fundamental commitments of *ohpahotân | oohpaahotaan*.

Safety is the foundation upon which all other commitments depend. Indigenous peoples have historically experienced systemic discrimination and racism within educational institutions. While overt forms of racism may have lessened over time, covert forms remain embedded in institutional policies, processes, and everyday practices. Indigenous students often navigate classrooms where their identities are scrutinized or where they are expected to act as the sole voice on Indigenous content. Indigenous staff frequently carry additional emotional and cultural labour, supporting reconciliation initiatives beyond the scope of their formal roles. Indigenous faculty encounter barriers in research evaluation processes that privilege colonial academic

metrics over community-engaged scholarship. Creating safety therefore requires more than symbolic gestures. It demands attention to institutional racism, accountability mechanisms for discrimination, and policies that ensure Indigenous peoples can study and work without experiencing marginalization. When safety is present, Indigenous peoples can contribute fully to the academic community. Without it, reconciliation remains an abstract commitment rather than a lived reality.

Wellness emerges from environments where individuals feel safe, respected, and valued. For Indigenous peoples, wellness is often understood holistically, encompassing physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual wellbeing. Within the university context, wellness must address the additional burdens placed on Indigenous individuals. Committing and acting when it comes to wellness requires institutional recognition of this labour and the development of policies that support balanced workloads, culturally relevant supports, and meaningful participation in decision-making. The principle of “nothing about us without us” must guide institutional processes (Battiste, 2013). Indigenous peoples must not simply be consulted but must hold decision-making authority on matters affecting Indigenous communities and initiatives. Wellness also requires culturally grounded supports such as access to Elders, Knowledge Keepers, ceremony, and community spaces. When supports such as this are integrated into institutional life, universities create environments where Indigenous peoples can thrive rather than merely persist.

Stewardship reflects the responsibility to uphold Indigenous cultures, languages, and protocols while ensuring that initiatives supporting Indigenous communities are sustained over time. Stewardship requires institutions to recognize the diversity of Indigenous nations and communities rather than treating Indigenous identity as a single, homogenous category. Within

the university setting, stewardship can be demonstrated through sustained program funding, leadership development for Indigenous staff, and the integration of Indigenous protocols into institutional practices. It also requires critical reflection on traditional academic structures that were not designed with Indigenous scholars in mind. Many Indigenous academics have navigated systems that prioritize conventional research outputs over community engagement. Research must focus on the needs, aspirations and people within every community that institutions have relationships with. It is about the on-going commitment stewardship that requires us to forego the colonial way of thinking and university driven timelines. If we work with communities, we prioritize their Ways of Knowing, being, and understanding. Stewardship requires universities to reconsider the following frameworks by Kirkness & Barnhardt (1991); Indigenous methodologies, knowledge systems, and relationships with communities, when developing evaluation systems. By supporting Indigenous scholars and cultural practices, institutions contribute to a broader transformation of academic culture and research.

Representation plays a crucial role in shaping inclusive institutions. Indigenous students benefit from seeing themselves reflected in faculty, leadership, and professional roles across campus. Representation signals that Indigenous peoples belong within the university and have a place in shaping its future. At USask, representation has grown through visible cultural spaces, artwork, educational installations, and leadership roles. These developments have helped affirm Indigenous presence within the institution. However, representation must extend beyond symbolic visibility to include meaningful participation in governance, leadership pathways for Indigenous staff, and recruitment and retention strategies for Indigenous faculty. Representation should also reflect the diversity of Indigenous nations present in Saskatchewan and beyond. When Indigenous peoples participate in decision-making at all levels of the institution,

universities become more responsive to community needs and more capable of advancing reconciliation.

Right relations form the ethical foundation of partnerships between universities and Indigenous nations. These relationships must be grounded in respect, reciprocity, and recognition of Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. Universities located on Indigenous lands carry specific responsibilities to the nations whose territories they occupy. At the University of Saskatchewan, this includes Treaty 6 Territory and the Homeland of the Métis. Right relations require institutions to listen carefully to Indigenous communities and ensure that partnerships are mutually beneficial. Indigenous nations must be engaged as partners and decisionmakers rather than as consultants or stakeholders. Developing right relations also requires institutional processes that support ongoing engagement with Indigenous leadership, governments, and communities. These relationships must be maintained and cared for through trust, transparency, and consistent collaboration.

Creation represents the innovative work required to transform institutions. Implementing *ohpahotân* | *oohpaahotaan* involves creating new programs, policies, learning spaces, and opportunities that reflect Indigenous priorities and knowledge systems. Education and awareness are key elements of this commitment. Faculty, staff, and students must develop an understanding of Indigenous histories, rights, and knowledge systems. There must also be direct focus on the placed based nature of implementing this commitment and must be directly connected to how each initiative or project reflects individual positionality. This learning process enables individuals across the institution to contribute to reconciliation efforts. Creation also involves building new academic pathways for Indigenous students and scholars. These pathways may include culturally grounded curricula, interdisciplinary research initiatives, and programs that

integrate community knowledge with academic inquiry. Sustaining these initiatives requires long-term institutional commitment. Creation is not a one-time act but an ongoing process of innovation and reflection.

Renewal emphasizes the responsibility to future generations. *ohpahotân | oohpaahotaan* reminds the university that Indigenous youth represent strength, hope, and possibility. Ensuring that future generations can access supportive and culturally respectful educational environments is central to reconciliation. By fostering safe and welcoming spaces, universities encourage Indigenous youth to pursue education, research, and leadership opportunities. These experiences contribute not only to individual success but also to the wellbeing of communities. Renewal also reflects the cyclical nature of Indigenous knowledge systems. Institutions must continuously revisit their commitments, evaluate their progress, and renew their dedication to reconciliation. Through renewal, universities ensure that reconciliation remains an evolving and enduring process.

### **Evaluation Questions and Institutional Learning**

Effective evaluation requires asking meaningful questions that illuminate both progress and challenges. In phase four each of the following question drove the evaluation process; t

What values guide the evaluation process?

- How are the seven fundamental commitments being honoured?
- What evidence demonstrates progress, and whose stories are being told?
- How can the institution ensure that difficult or critical experiences are included alongside positive narratives?
- How can evaluation inform future planning and institutional accountability?

Evaluation must prioritize storytelling and lived experiences as forms of evidence. Indigenous informed evaluation must also reflect relational accountability, recognizing that research and assessment processes are grounded in responsibilities to community, relationships, and shared knowledge (Weber-Pillwax, 1999). Indigenous approaches to evaluation often emphasize narrative, relational knowledge, and respect for community voices as legitimate forms of evidence (Kovach, 2009). Indigenous methodologies emphasize relational knowledge and narrative understanding (Wilson, 2008). This is critical when moving into the space of Indigenous communities. Although all Indigenous communities are distinct in cultural practice and Ways of Knowing, being relational and using oral traditions to pass on knowledge is common practice. Incorporating these approaches allows universities to capture the full complexity of institutional change.

## **Conclusion**

Indigenization, decolonization and reconciliation work is common and broadly accepted across Canadian institutions especially in post-secondary. Canadian universities have increasingly recognized their role in advancing reconciliation through institutional commitments to Indigenous education and partnership with Indigenous communities (Universities Canada, 2015). As the university builds UPlan 2035 there is a new opportunity for USask to take a unique and unwavering stance in telling the truth toward effective and critical systems change leading to Indigenization, decolonization and reconciliation. ohpahotân | oohpaahotaan represents a significant commitment by USask to advance reconciliation and transform institutional systems. Five years into its implementation, the strategy has generated important conversations, engagement, and progress across campus. At the same time, reconciliation requires sustained

effort, humility, and accountability. USask must be willing to confront uncomfortable truths about systemic barriers and inequities that persist within academic spaces.

Evaluating and implementing the strategy provides an opportunity to reflect on progress while renewing the institution's commitment to Indigenous peoples and communities. It is imperative that USask is making a concerted effort toward new and existing partnerships with Indigenous communities, nations, tribal councils, organizations and governments. To reflect, we must share our progress and give space for feedback. This process has contributed to that and now it is time to listen. By grounding evaluation in the seven fundamental commitments and the principles of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action through a story telling narrative, USask can continue moving toward meaningful systemic change.

Reconciliation within post-secondary education is not a destination but an ongoing journey. The responsibility to “fly up together” requires collective commitment from all members of the university community.

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