

RECLAIMING & REIMAGINING



**Post-Secondary Accessibility
for Indigenous Learners**



CASA
Canadian Alliance of
Student Associations

ACAE
Alliance canadienne des
associations étudiantes

Prepared By:

Shannon Cornelson

Vice President Consultation and Engagement

Indigenous Students' Union at the University of Alberta

National Indigenous Advocacy Committee (NIAC) Co-Chair

Tera Cardinal

Vice President External

Student Association of Mount Royal University

Trishtina Godoy-Contois

Vice President External and Indigenous Circle Voice

Athabasca University Students' Union

Rose Grant

Vice President Research & Policy

University of New Brunswick Students' Union

With files from:

Trevor Potts

Policy and Research Analyst

Canadian Alliance of Student Associations



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Foreword by NIAC

The National Indigenous Advocacy Committee (NIAC) is a national advocacy body within CASA, composed of Indigenous students from across Turtle Island. This group represents Indigenous students' advocacy interests within CASA and believes that access to post-secondary education is an inherent treaty right, guaranteed under the Numbered Treaties (1871-1921).

NIAC's mission is to ensure Indigenous students are being given opportunities to enter and succeed in post-secondary, as well as to advocate for increased action to meet the Truth & Reconciliation Commission's 94 calls to action.

CASA Principles

The Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA) believes that all post-secondary students in Canada should have access to an accessible, affordable, high quality, and innovative education. Accessibility and affordability means eliminating barriers to participation in all aspects of a post-secondary education (PSE).

CASA believes that all students should have opportunities to access PSE, particularly those who have been previously excluded from

participation due to historic, institutional, and socio-economic barriers. Indigenous learners represent the fastest-growing and youngest demographic group in the country, and have the potential to contribute in diverse and meaningful ways to their campuses, cultures, and communities. Fully realizing the immense potential of Indigenous learners will help make Canadian PSE more accessible and affordable to the next generation of learners.

Our Vision for Indigenous Learners

CASA envisions a post-secondary system where Indigenous learners have opportunities to access post-secondary education and meaningful career-relevant experiences while studying, and are able to draw on the considerable knowledge and expertise they develop in their studies as they embark on their careers. CASA envisions a country

where all Indigenous learners who want to access post-secondary education have opportunities to do so, where they can make the most of their skills and abilities, and where they can pursue a career field through which they have the opportunity to meaningfully contribute and impact their families, home communities, and broader economy.

In particular, CASA supports the following visions and goals:

- The federal government has an integral role to play in ensuring that all Indigenous learners across Canada have the resources and supports they need to reach their full potential.
- Indigenous learners from all program types, whether college, polytechnic, undergraduate, graduate or doctoral, should have the funding support that they need in order to fully access post-secondary education.
- Indigenous learners should have access to effective, culturally-focused academic and non-academic support services through their post-secondary institutions.
- Opportunities should be available through post-secondary programs to help Indigenous learners connect their knowledge and proficiencies they develop during their studies with the workplace skills required to participate in today's economy, without compromising their treaty rights.
- Indigenous learners should have access to research opportunities and funding supports through their institution to generate Indigenous research.
- Indigenous learners having access to post-secondary education benefits students, Indigenous communities, the economy, and Canadian society as a whole.

Context and Background Information

RAPID GROWTH OF INDIGENOUS LEARNERS

The evidence is clear that post-secondary education (PSE) leads to improved employment opportunities and career outcomes. Over the course of their lives, Indigenous graduates with credentials from across the spectrum of post-secondary programs, including apprenticeships¹, trade certificates, college diplomas, and undergraduate and graduate degrees, have enjoyed significantly higher rates of employment compared with high school graduates². Median annual and career earnings, meanwhile, rise consistently in relation to post-secondary credentials. The evidence suggests that the importance of a post-secondary education, whether through an apprenticeship, college, or university credential, will only continue to rise.

Indigenous peoples are the fastest growing segment of the Canadian population^{3,4}. Since 2006, the Indigenous population has grown 29.4%⁵, nearly four times the rate of the non-Indigenous population⁶, and is projected by Statistics Canada to grow by 36% between now and 2041⁷.

As of the most recent 2021 Census results, 1.8 million individuals identified as Indigenous⁸, up 28 percent from 2011⁹. The Indigenous population in Canada is also the youngest and fastest growing demographic group in Canada, with 44% under the age of 25¹⁰. Within this age demographic, 70% of First Nations youth report they want to participate in post-secondary education (PSE)¹¹.

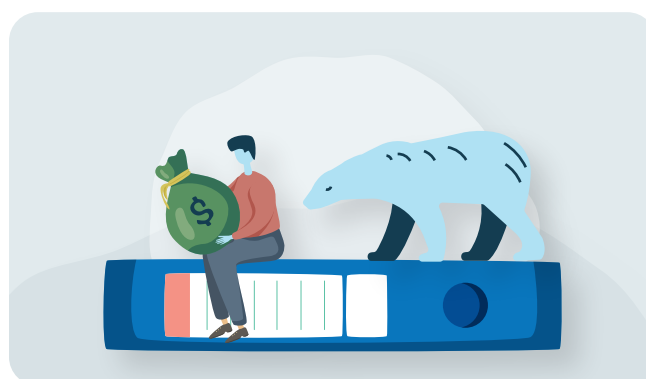
Furthermore, Indspire projects that 130,000 Indigenous individuals from the ages of 17 to 51 will be eligible to attend post-secondary education in Canada by 2023¹². However, despite this rapid growth in demand for post-secondary access, federal funding for Indigenous post-secondary education has not kept pace¹³.

BARRIERS TO ACCESSING POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

Despite these rapid growth trends, however, there has long been a significant educational gap between all Indigenous groups compared with the non-Indigenous population^{14 15 16}.

According to Statistics Canada, only 53% of Indigenous individuals (aged 24 and above) earned a post-secondary certificate¹⁷, compared with 3-in-4 non-Indigenous individuals (73%)^{18 19}.

Furthermore, the educational gap widens when comparing rates of university degree completion: only 8.7% of individuals who identify as First Nations have earned a Bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 9.8% of the more broadly defined Aboriginal population, including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit, and 29.3% of the non-Indigenous total Canadian population²⁰. Indigenous Services Canada's (ISC) 2021 annual report to Parliament declared that the reason for these significant educational gaps was due to "...a history of colonial assimilation practices, chronic underfunding, and inadequate education systems."²¹. This finding aligns with the Assembly of First Nations' report that Indigenous learners require "adequate, predictable, sustainable and equitable funding and resources to support strong student outcomes."²²



A. THE POST-SECONDARY STUDENT SUPPORT PROGRAM

There are numerous reasons for this current state of affairs. First and foremost is the legacy of historical barriers that were designed to encourage cultural assimilation²³. The **Numbered Treaties (1871-1921)** negotiated between First Nations and Crown Treaty Commissioners set obligations for the Crown to provide opportunities for western higher education to Indigenous peoples without interfering with their right to control Indigenous education²⁴. Instead, the subsequent **Indian Act**, passed by the federal government under the provisions of Section 91(24) of the 1867 Constitution Act, effectively forbade all 'Registered Indians' from attending post-secondary education unless they gave up their legal status, rights, and identity²⁵. All subsequent federal funding²⁶ towards "all Indian wards of the Crown in Canada"²⁷ has since been modelled under racial divisions outlined in the **Indian Act**, including the most widely accessed federal funding program, the **Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP)**²⁸.

The Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP) comprises 93% of all federal funding to Indigenous students, yet, the program funded less than half (45.2%) of the 54,805 First Nations students enrolled in PSE in 2017-18.

Though funding has since been expanded in Budget 2019, the PSSSP still does not provide enough funding to meet the growing demand for Indigenous education. In total, the PSSSP regularly provides assistance for between 23,000 and 24,500 students per year²⁹. As reported by the Assembly of First Nations: "The demand for student funding far exceeds the money that First Nations receive to support members who wish to attend post-secondary."³⁰

B. LACK OF SUPPORTS

Indigenous learners also face physical barriers as a result of historic federal treatment surrounding Indigenous education, particularly in rural and remote regions. These communities have less educational offerings available, and as a result, Indigenous learners need to seek higher education in distant towns and cities of a larger size, which place significant additional costs on these students associated with accessing higher education, including loss of community supports and travel expenses³¹.

Furthermore, many Indigenous learners encounter socio-economic barriers at Canadian post-secondary institutions, where institutional biases, including Eurocentric curriculae, have made post-secondary education less welcoming of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit culture, knowledge, and ways of learning³².



As a result, many Indigenous learners do not have access to the supports they need while attending post-secondary institutions, which significantly impacts their success in post-secondary.

C. THE INDIGENOUS SKILLS AND EMPLOYMENT TRAINING PROGRAM

The right for Indigenous peoples to control access to post-secondary education is an established right guaranteed by the Numbered Treaties of 1871-1921, however, the federal government continues to infringe on this treaty right. The **Indigenous Skills and Employment Training (ISET)** program currently provides funding directly to Indigenous service delivery organizations (e.g. Tribal Councils) through ISET agreements, which dictate funding requirements and allocation amounts.

However, since 2016, ISET agreements tie program funding directly to labour market “success”, which overrides the Indigenous right to self-determination through education, as guaranteed in the Numbered Treaties of 1871-1921.



Indigenous labour outcomes should be a government priority; autonomy in education is important not only because it is a Treaty right, but because it allows Indigenous learners to explore different academic fields, not just those with specific government economic outcomes. The government cannot, and must not, prescribe what kind of education is important for Indigenous communities.

D. INDIGENOUS RESEARCH

Historically, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis knowledge and ways of knowing have been dismissed by colonial scholars, and research conducted by non-Indigenous researchers on Indigenous communities without clear research ethics policies or Indigenous consent has had harmful impacts on Indigenous peoples for generations, leading to a legacy of exploitation and mistrust³³.

Previous narrow eligibility requirements for Tri-Agencies funding has acted as a barrier to Indigenous research proposals, and limited the ability of many Indigenous researchers to qualify for funding. Furthermore, while **Indigenous Institutes** act as important hubs for generating Indigenous-led research, current funding restrictions inhibit their ability to qualify for certain federal supports, further limiting their ability to generate to Indigenous research.

In recent years, there have been increased efforts to decolonialise post-secondary education, and redefine the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to better establish Indigenous agency and control over research concerning Indigenous cultures, communities, and their concerns³⁴. It is essential that the federal government initiate policy adjustments in order to better ensure that Indigenous Institutes and researchers are able to access critical funding needed to generate Indigenous-led research.

OPPORTUNITIES: ACCESS AND EXPERIENCE

Today, the number of Indigenous students receiving federal government support has grown from only 3,600 in 1977 to approximately 24,772^{35 36}. Currently, the federal government provides the vast majority of funding (93%) for registered status students through the **Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP)** and the University and College Entrance program (UCEPP), both operated by **Indigenous Services Canada (ISC)**. Indigenous institutes and post-secondary institutions (PSIs) offering Indigenous academic programming are provided federal funding through the **Post-Secondary Partnerships program (PSP)**. Indigenous researchers are eligible to apply for Tri-Agency Council funding, however the lack of representation on decision-making bodies hinders both funding success rates and much needed Indigenous-led discussions on decolonized evaluation criteria.

Lastly, to facilitate the transition from training to workforce, the federal government manages funding towards training programs through the **Indigenous Skills and Employment Training (ISET)** program, which dictates the terms of contribution agreements, and controls how funding flows to Indigenous service delivery

organizations (eg Métis training-to-employment organizations) based on whether programming meets labour market “success” criteria.

Ultimately, although participation rates are growing among Indigenous peoples, these communities are still significantly under-represented in Canada’s post-secondary educational system³⁷.

Given the long history of legislative, socio-economic, physical, and cultural barriers to Indigenous learners accessing post-secondary education, it is essential that the federal government institute key, evidence-based policies to reduce this significant educational gap, and actively support Indigenous access and control over Indigenous learning and post-secondary education.



Policy Summaries

CASA has identified a variety of specific policies and tools that the federal government can implement to improve the educational experience and career prospects of Indigenous learners in Canada. While no program offers a singular solution to this issue, taken collectively, the following suite of policy proposals offer exciting opportunities to help ensure that more Indigenous students can fully access post-secondary education, to everyone's benefit.

INCREASING INVESTMENTS IN INDIGENOUS LEARNERS



Principles:

As guaranteed in the **Numbered Treaties (1871-1921)** negotiated between First Nations and Crown Treaty Commissioners, the federal government has an obligation to ensure opportunities for higher education are provided to Indigenous learners without interfering with Indigenous control of education. The government of Canada has a responsibility to ensure that existing federal student financial aid support programs for Indigenous learners are properly funded, effective, accountable, and cooperatively enhanced in order to match the growing population of Indigenous learners.

Concerns:

CASA's Indigenous students face significant obstacles in their efforts to access post-secondary education. Existing federal funding for Indigenous learners still largely follows the racial divisions outlined in the **Indian Act**, as detailed below.³⁸ Today, the federal government of Canada provides nearly 93% of its post-secondary funding to Indigenous learners through two major program streams, the **Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP)**, and the University and College Entrance Preparation Program (UCEPP), which are both coordinated nationally by the education branch within the Education and Social Development Programs and Partnerships (ESDPP) section of **Indigenous Services Canada (ISC)**.³⁹ As stated in its National Program Guidelines for 2022-2023, the PSSSP provides non-repayable financial aid for First Nations students towards accessing post-secondary education at a post-secondary institution, including public

colleges, universities, and First Nations institutions⁴⁰. Crucially, the guidelines stipulate that only applicants with registered "Indian status" can qualify for PSSSP funding⁴¹.

The program regularly provides between 23,000 and 24,500 students per year with funding, less than half the number of students applying each year for funding, and approximately providing funding for only 19% of total eligible Indigenous students seeking post-secondary education⁴².

The benefits of these investments in the PSSSP are substantial: for Indigenous students who receive PSSSP funding, their annual rate of success in post-secondary is 84%, meaning that over 4 in 5 PSSSP-supported students either complete their semester in satisfactory academic standing or graduate⁴³.

Recommendations:

Based on these concerns and challenges, CASA recommends the following strategies and policies to facilitate the successful access of Indigenous learners to post-secondary education funding:

- » **The Government of Canada** expand its investments in the Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP) to meet program demand.
- » **Indigenous Services Canada (ISC)** revise the PSSSP/UCEPPP National Program Guidelines to include instructions on how to enrol student applicants into the Canada Student Grants program, under Section 5 - Eligible Students.
- » **Indigenous Services Canada (ISC)** expand eligibility requirements for Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP) funding to include Métis students, as well as students from Northwest Territories (NWT), James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (JBNQA), and Northeastern Quebec Agreements (NEQA) regions who have resided outside their territories for 12+ months.

SUPPORTING INDIGENOUS INSTITUTES AND RESEARCHERS



Principles:

Indigenous research is a core element of expressing Indigenous treaty rights, and meaningfully contributing to post-secondary institutional research, communities, and the economy. Indigenous Institutes provide essential support and opportunities for generating Indigenous research and sharing Indigenous knowledge, and need to be adequately and sustainably supported by the federal government to ensure their ongoing success. Indigenous learners must have opportunities and funding to design, plan, implement, assess, and disseminate their original research.

Concerns:

A critical element of improving accessibility for Indigenous learners to post-secondary education (PSE) is effectively supporting Indigenous Institutes of higher learning.

Not only are Indigenous Institutes expressions of the Indigenous right to establish control over Indigenous PSE and to address historical barriers, but they establish and provide culturally and linguistically relevant methods of teaching that have been shown to increase post-secondary attainment rates in Indigenous students, as well as provide holistic and culturally-relevant supports that drive Indigenous student success⁴⁴.

However, despite their demonstrated benefits, many Indigenous Institutes lack secure operational funding and lack access to capital grants, which limits their capacity for program delivery, long term planning, staff retention, and wrap-around support services.

Besides providing higher education to Indigenous students, Indigenous Institutes also play an important role in conducting research. In particular, Indigenous Institutes are uniquely positioned to understand the needs and priorities of Indigenous peoples, and conduct research that impacts and prioritises the needs of Indigenous communities⁴⁵. However, European colonisation has profoundly influenced the definition and practice of research in post-secondary education⁴⁶. Historically, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis knowledge and ways of knowing have been dismissed by colonial scholars, and research conducted by non-Indigenous researchers on Indigenous communities has had harmful impacts on Indigenous peoples for generations,

leading to a legacy of exploitation and mistrust⁴⁷. Currently, the Tri-Agencies' eligibility requirements require policy adjustments to ensure that Indigenous researchers are able to fully access the research funding they need.

Recommendations:

Based on these concerns and challenges, CASA recommends the following strategies and policies to facilitate the successful access of Indigenous Institutes and researchers to federal supports:

- » **The Tri-Council Agencies** develop a strategic plan to support the long-term advancement of Indigenous Research, and enhance the research capacity of Indigenous communities and the training of Indigenous researchers.
- » **The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)** revisit the 'Subject Matter Eligibility' criteria to include Indigenous researchers as eligible to apply for funding.
- » **Indigenous Institutes** work with First Nations governments to develop robust research ethics policies, or update existing guidelines, that are mandatory for all researchers and post-secondary institutions (PSIs) wishing to conduct research within their communities.
- » **Indigenous Institutes** work with the **Tri-Agencies and the Interagency Advisory Panel on Research Ethics (PRE)** to update Tri-Council Policy Statement 2, specifically Chapter 9, to be more inclusive of Indigenous researchers working within their own communities in service of the needs of those communities.
- » **The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)** work with Indigenous Institutes Consortium (IIC) to modify its Institutional Eligibility classifications to be inclusive of Indigenous Institutes, and to create appropriate processes to evaluate their eligibility.
- » **The Tri-Council Agencies** provide funding for Elders through full- or part-time positions at Indigenous Institutes, so that they can share their cultural knowledge and ways of knowing with researchers and the community, and ensure these vital practices may be preserved.
- » **The Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC)** co-develop a policy for Indigenous Research in the natural sciences.

REVISING FUNDING MODELS BASED ON LABOUR MARKET OUTCOMES



Principles:

For Indigenous students, the choice to pursue a given field in post-secondary education should not present additional barriers, and should not be the cause for ineligibility for federal funding. As guaranteed in the **Numbered Treaties (1871-1921)** negotiated between First Nations and Crown Treaty Commissioners, the federal government has an obligation to ensure opportunities for higher education are provided to Indigenous learners without interfering with Indigenous control of education. It is vital that post-secondary educational programming and skills training is properly funded, maintained, and enhanced by the federal government, and does not interfere with Indigenous treaty rights to control Indigenous access to educational opportunities in post-secondary.

Concerns:

The federal government invests in specific programs to facilitate the participation of Indigenous learners in the labour market⁴⁸. For over two decades, **Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC)** has provided funding for Indigenous organizations to facilitate educational programming to Indigenous peoples that complements the Canadian labour market.⁴⁹ This included programs such as the Aboriginal Human Resources Development Strategy, the Skills and Partnership Fund, and the Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy (ASETS)⁵⁰.

Since 2016, the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) enabled the addition of further income tax data to funding profiles, allowing the ESDC to monitor post-program outcomes in the workforce over consecutive years⁵¹. Ultimately, this gave the ESDC the ability to gauge how different programs performed on various labour market indicators, and use this cost-benefit analysis to adjust funding allocations based on how closely a program produced labour market “success”⁵². In 2018, the federal government rebranded ASETS as the **Indigenous Skills and Employment Training (ISET)** program, providing funding directly to Indigenous service delivery organizations (eg Tribal Councils) who deliver employment-targeted training interventions

for Indigenous peoples through contribution agreements, with the goal of improving Indigenous people’s participation in the Canadian workforce.

However, in practice, ISET contribution agreements dictate funding requirements for Indigenous organizations, effectively determining which students receive funding based solely on whether their program produces labour market “success”.

In essence, the ISET program does not guarantee that Indigenous organizations have full autonomy over educational programming and economic development, which contradicts Indigenous treaty rights to self-determination through education⁵³.

Recommendations:

Based on these concerns and challenges, CASA recommends the following strategies and policies to facilitate the successful access of Indigenous learners to post-secondary education:

» **Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) modify the terms of reference for the ISET agreements to remove ties of funding for post-secondary education to labour market outcomes.**



SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDED CHANGES

In summary, CASA proposes a number of specific policies geared at addressing the educational gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, and increasing Indigenous access to post-secondary education. CASA calls for improved information gathering and data analysis around Indigenous student access issues, because effective policy is always driven by strong evidence. Beyond better information, CASA advocates for the introduction and improvement of several policies and programs aimed squarely at supporting Indigenous students and recent graduates as they seek to translate their post-secondary achievements into prosperous careers.

INCREASED INVESTMENTS IN INDIGENOUS LEARNERS

- » Expand investments in the **Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP)** to meet program demand.
- » Revise PSSSP/UCEPPP National Program Guidelines - Section 5 to include instructions on how to enrol students in the Canada Student Grants program.
- » Expand eligibility criteria for the **Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP)** to include more Indigenous students, including Métis students, as well as students from Northwest Territories (NWT), James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (JBNQA), and Northeastern Quebec Agreements (NEQA) regions who have resided outside their territories for 12+ months.

SUPPORTING INDIGENOUS INSTITUTES AND RESEARCHERS

- » Develop a Tri-Agencies strategic plan to support long-term advancement of Indigenous research.
- » Revisit the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) 'Subject Matter Eligibility' criteria to ensure Indigenous researchers' eligibility for funding.
- » Encourage Indigenous Institutes to work with First Nations governments to develop mandatory robust research ethics policies for all researchers to follow when conducting research in Indigenous communities.
- » Update Tri-Council Policy Statement 2 - Chapter 9 to be more inclusive of Indigenous researchers working in their own communities.

- » Modify the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Institutional Eligibility classifications to be inclusive of Indigenous institutes.
- » Provide funding for Elders at Indigenous Institutes to enhance Indigenous research knowledge and practices.
- » Co-develop a NSERC policy for Indigenous research in the natural sciences.

REVISING FUNDING MODELS BASED ON LABOUR MARKET OUTCOME

- » Modify the Terms of Reference in **Indigenous Skills and Employment Training (ISET)** Contribution Agreements to remove all ties of ISET program funding from labour market outcomes.

Through these initiatives, CASA is confident that Indigenous learners will have the supports they need to fully access post-secondary education, and ultimately discover better opportunities to contribute to their communities today and into the future.

Endnotes

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About CASA

The Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA) is a non-partisan, not-for-profit advocacy organisation representing students at 25 student associations across the country. Through our partnership with the Quebec Student Union/Union étudiante du Québec (UEQ), CASA represents 365,000 students across Canada. CASA advocates for accessible, affordable, innovative, and high quality post-secondary education in Canada. For over 25 years, CASA has done so successfully through policy and research development, awareness campaigns, government relations efforts, and partnerships with other stakeholders in the education sector. Part of this work is ensuring that conversations surrounding post-secondary education are undertaken with the most up-to-date information and with direct feedback from students and other leading advocacy stakeholders across the country.



CASA
Canadian Alliance of
Student Associations

ACAE

Alliance canadienne des
associations étudiantes



130 Slater Street, Suite 410, Ottawa ON, K1P 6E2



casa-acae.com



@casaacae



613.236.3457



/casaacae



info@casa.ca



@casaacae

Our Members



We represent 365,000 students across Canada.