

## Chapter 5

# Saskatchewan Polytechnic—Supporting Success of Indigenous Students

### 1.0 MAIN POINTS

In 2021–22, Saskatchewan Polytechnic had total enrolment of almost 15,000 students, of which 15% self-declared as Indigenous. Sask Polytech uses its *2018–2023 Indigenous Student Success Strategy* to improve post-secondary educational outcomes for its Indigenous students.

We assessed Sask Polytech’s processes for supporting the success of Indigenous students to increase student enrolment, retention, and graduation rates.

At February 2023, we found that while Sask Polytech implemented several initiatives (e.g., Indigenous Student Centre programming, application subsidies) aimed at improving Indigenous student success and enrolment, Indigenous student enrolments decreased by 30% over the period of its current Strategy (2018: 3,200 compared to 2022: 2,200).

We found Sask Polytech needs to:

- Expand performance measure targets to evaluate the success of its strategies for supporting Indigenous students. For example, it has not set a target for Indigenous student enrolments.
- Establish thresholds for when to investigate and take action on unexpected changes in key measures related to Indigenous student success. Indigenous student enrolments declined by 30% but Sask Polytech did not evaluate reasons for the decline nor establish actions to address declining enrolments.
- Conduct regular consultations with Indigenous communities about its Indigenous Student Success Strategy.
- Verify Indigenous identity of staff in Indigenous-designated positions.

Reducing disparities in educational outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students will support more equitable outcomes in attaining higher education, as well as in employment earnings and overall success.

### 2.0 INTRODUCTION

This chapter reports the results of our audit of Saskatchewan Polytechnic’s processes, for the period ended February 15, 2023, to support the success of Indigenous students by increasing student enrolment, retention and graduation rates.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Indigenous refers to individuals who identify as First Nations, Métis or Inuit.



Sask Polytech's *Indigenous Student Success Strategy 2018–2023* is an institution-wide strategy to increase recruitment, retention, graduation rates and the overall success of Indigenous students across all programs. Indigenous students should feel welcome, inspired, empowered, and that Sask Polytech is a place where they belong.<sup>2</sup>

## 2.1 Background

*The Saskatchewan Polytechnic Act* makes Saskatchewan Polytechnic responsible to carry out post-secondary applied education and research.<sup>3</sup> It is the province's only polytechnic.<sup>4,5</sup> Sask Polytech provides certificate, diploma, degree, post-graduate certificate, and apprenticeship training. In addition, Sask Polytech provides adult basic education and skills training programming.<sup>6</sup>

Sask Polytech serves students at four campuses in: Saskatoon, Regina, Prince Albert, and Moose Jaw. In 2021–22, Sask Polytech had total enrolment of 14,969 (2020–21: 14,990), of which 15% (2020–21: 16%) self-declared as Indigenous.<sup>7,8</sup>

## 2.2 Post-Secondary Education for Indigenous Students in Canada

Indigenous post-secondary students may experience barriers to success, including inadequate financial assistance, inequitable academic preparation, and on-campus policies and practices not reflective of Indigenous cultures and contexts.<sup>9</sup>

In 2014, Canada's largest post-secondary education network developed the *Indigenous Education Protocol for Colleges and Institutes* as part of working toward better outcomes for Indigenous students.<sup>10</sup> This document underscores the importance of structures and approaches required to address Indigenous peoples' learning needs and to support self-determination and socio-economic development of Indigenous communities.<sup>11</sup> Signatories included 71 institutes across Canada including, Saskatchewan Polytechnic, Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies, and several regional colleges.<sup>12</sup> Sask Polytech signed the Protocol in 2015.<sup>13</sup>

As a signatory to the Protocol, Sask Polytech agrees to:

- Commit to making Indigenous education a priority

<sup>2</sup> [www.saskpolytech.ca/about/organization/indigenous-strategy.aspx](http://www.saskpolytech.ca/about/organization/indigenous-strategy.aspx) (30 March 2023).

<sup>3</sup> *The Saskatchewan Polytechnic Act*, s. 10 and 16.

<sup>4</sup> A polytechnic is a technical training enterprise offering appropriate credentials in applied fields, including degrees, apprenticeship training, diplomas and certificates; is industry responsive; and supports economic development through applied research [Saskatchewan Polytechnic, *What is a Polytechnic*. [www.saskpolytech.ca/about/about-us/documents/MAR-18-023.pdf](http://www.saskpolytech.ca/about/about-us/documents/MAR-18-023.pdf) (22 April 2023)].

<sup>5</sup> Saskatchewan Polytechnic, *Annual Report 2021–22*, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.

<sup>8</sup> Saskatchewan Polytechnic, *Annual Report 2020–21*, pp. 15–16.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness, *Supporting Indigenous Student Success in Post-Secondary Education: Thriving from Application to Graduation* (August 2020), p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> [www.collegesinstitutes.ca/what-we-do/advocacy/accelerating-reconciliation/indigenous-education-protocol/](http://www.collegesinstitutes.ca/what-we-do/advocacy/accelerating-reconciliation/indigenous-education-protocol/) (20 April 2023).

<sup>11</sup> Colleges and Institutes Canada is the national and international voice of Canada's largest post-secondary education network. Its work supports Canada's publicly supported colleges, institutes, and polytechnics. [www.collegesinstitutes.ca/what-we-do/](http://www.collegesinstitutes.ca/what-we-do/) (20 April 2023).

<sup>12</sup> [www.collegesinstitutes.ca/what-we-do/advocacy/accelerating-reconciliation/indigenous-education-protocol/](http://www.collegesinstitutes.ca/what-we-do/advocacy/accelerating-reconciliation/indigenous-education-protocol/) (20 April 2023).

<sup>13</sup> [www.saskpolytech.ca/about/organization/indigenous-strategy.aspx](http://www.saskpolytech.ca/about/organization/indigenous-strategy.aspx) (30 March 2023).

- Ensure governance structures recognize and respect Indigenous peoples
- Implement intellectual and cultural traditions of Indigenous peoples through curriculum and learning approaches relevant to learners and communities
- Support students and employees in increasing understanding and reciprocity among Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples
- Commit to increasing the number of Indigenous employees with ongoing appointments throughout the institution, including Indigenous senior administrators
- Establish Indigenous-centred holistic services and learning environments for learner success
- Build relationships with, and be accountable to, Indigenous communities in support of self-determination through education, training and applied research.<sup>14</sup>

## 2.3 Educational Outcomes Help Reduce Disparity

In 2015, the *Truth and Reconciliation Committee Calls to Action* appealed to the Government of Canada to develop, with Indigenous groups, a joint strategy to eliminate educational and employment gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians.<sup>15</sup>

Obtaining higher education leads to better outcomes in the labour market. As of 2016, the average person with a college diploma in Saskatchewan earned 27.3% more than with only a high school diploma.<sup>16</sup> Sask Polytech estimates its average graduate will earn \$505,000 more over their lifetime than someone who only holds a high school diploma.<sup>17</sup>

In the 2021 census, average income for Saskatchewan's non-Indigenous people was \$55,050 compared to \$40,720 for the province's Indigenous peoples.<sup>18</sup> Reducing differences in educational outcomes in Saskatchewan between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people will support more equitable outcomes.

**Figure 1** shows the disparity in the number of Sask Polytech graduates between self-identified Indigenous students and their non-Indigenous counterparts. Overall, 2018 had the highest number of self-identified Indigenous graduates of the previous four years at 827 graduates; higher than in 2021 with 648 graduates.

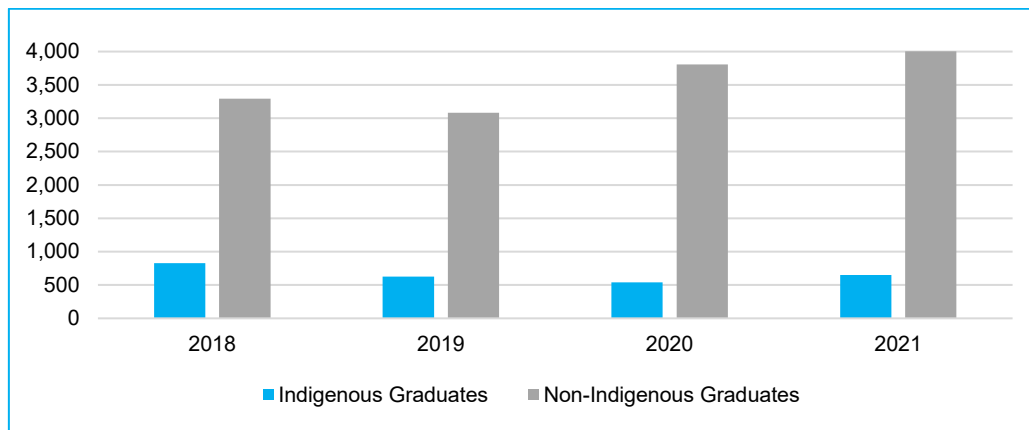
<sup>14</sup> [www.collegesinstitutes.ca/what-we-do/advocacy/accelerating-reconciliation/indigenous-education-protocol/](http://www.collegesinstitutes.ca/what-we-do/advocacy/accelerating-reconciliation/indigenous-education-protocol/) (20 April 2023).

<sup>15</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action* (2015). Call to Action #7.

<sup>16</sup> Statistics Canada. Table 37-10-0152-01 Average earnings or employment income, by age group and highest certificate, diploma or degree (x 1,000) [www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/abpopprof/index.cfm](http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/abpopprof/index.cfm) (20 April 2023).

<sup>17</sup> Saskatchewan Polytechnic, *Annual Report 2021–22*, p. 11.

<sup>18</sup> Statistics Canada. Table 98-10-0281-01 Income statistics by Indigenous identity and residence by Indigenous geography: Canada, provinces and territories. [www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=9810028101](http://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=9810028101) (20 April 2023).

**Figure 1—Sask Polytech Graduates 2018–21<sup>A</sup>**

Source: Adapted from Saskatchewan Polytechnic records.

<sup>A</sup> Does not include students graduating from brokered programs (i.e., programs offered by partner institutions such as Gabriel Dumont Institute, that uses Sask Polytech curriculum to deliver Sask Polytech programs).

### 3.0 AUDIT CONCLUSION

We concluded Saskatchewan Polytechnic had, other than in the following areas, effective processes, for the period ended February 15, 2023, to support the success of Indigenous students by increasing student enrolment, retention and graduation rates.

Sask Polytech needs to:

- Expand performance measure targets to evaluate the success of its strategies for supporting Indigenous students
- Establish thresholds for when to investigate and take action on unexpected changes in key measures related to Indigenous student success
- Conduct regular consultations with Indigenous communities about its Indigenous Student Success Strategy
- Verify Indigenous identity of staff in Indigenous-designated positions

**Figure 2—Audit Objective, Criteria, and Approach**

**Audit Objective:** The objective of this audit is to assess the effectiveness of Saskatchewan Polytechnic's processes, for the period ended February 15, 2023, for supporting the success of Indigenous students by increasing student enrolment, retention and graduation rates.

**Audit Criteria:**

Processes to:

**1. Maintain strategy to support success of Indigenous students**

- Engage with stakeholders (e.g., Indigenous students and alumni, Indigenous communities, staff) to identify barriers to student success (e.g., academic preparedness, inadequate funding, cultural and learning disconnects), and opportunities for improvement
- Set specific, measurable targets for evaluating progress in supporting Indigenous students (e.g., number of Indigenous students, Indigenous student graduation rate, Indigenous student employment rate, number of courses incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing, number of courses offered in Indigenous languages)

- Identify key initiatives to achieve targets (e.g., recruitment focusing on Indigenous communities, resources to make Indigenous students welcome on campuses, targeted financial assistance to address barriers such as access to housing or child care)
  - Allocate resources (financial, human)
  - Communicate strategy to stakeholders
- 2. Implement strategy and related initiatives**
- Provide learning experience for Indigenous students consistent with strategy
  - Track results of initiatives to support Indigenous students
  - Periodically report on results to stakeholders
- 3. Evaluate effectiveness of strategy**
- Analyze outcomes against targets (e.g., graduation rates, employment, student retention, student satisfaction)
  - Adjust future initiatives and/or allocation of resources as necessary

**Audit Approach:**

To conduct this audit, we followed the standards for assurance engagements published in the *CPA Canada Handbook—Assurance* (CSAE 3001). To evaluate Sask Polytech's processes, we used the above criteria based on our related work, reviews of literature including reports of other auditors, and consultations with management. Sask Polytech management agreed with the above criteria.

We examined Sask Polytech's procedures, policies, strategies, and reports relating to implementing its Strategy. We assessed Sask Polytech's processes to establish targets, allocate internal resources, communicate with stakeholders, and monitor progress in improving success of Indigenous students. We analyzed data collected by Sask Polytech around Indigenous students (e.g., enrolment, graduation rates, employment rates). We used an external consultant with expertise in the area to help us identify good practice and assess Sask Polytech's processes.

## 4.0 KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 4.1 Indigenous Student Success Strategy Established

By reviewing leading practices and using stakeholder consultations, Saskatchewan Polytechnic appropriately developed, and updates, its *Indigenous Student Success Strategy* to guide its actions in improving Indigenous student success.

In 2017, Sask Polytech began developing its current *Indigenous Student Success Strategy* after assessing progress against its recommendations and targets set in its *2009 Aboriginal Student Achievement Plan*.<sup>19,20</sup> To create the Strategy, Sask Polytech reviewed leading practices, as well as evaluated its progress in meeting the recommendations outlined in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action.<sup>21</sup>

Sask Polytech also gathered input from stakeholders (e.g., students, Indigenous communities) on their priorities and expectations for the Strategy and obtained feedback through a series of group sessions, one-on-one conversations, paper-based questionnaires, and an online survey.<sup>22</sup>

**Figure 3** outlines Sask Polytech's goals established in its Strategy related to Indigenous students.

<sup>19</sup> [www.saskpolytech.ca/about/organization/indigenous-strategy.aspx](http://www.saskpolytech.ca/about/organization/indigenous-strategy.aspx) (30 March 2023).

<sup>20</sup> Indigenous is a term developed by First Nations, Métis and Inuit people for First Nation, Métis and Inuit peoples and is considered to be more inclusive than Aboriginal. Aboriginal refers to the first inhabitants of Canada and includes First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people. [Adapted from an internal Saskatchewan Polytechnic document].

<sup>21</sup> Saskatchewan Polytechnic, *Indigenous Student Success Strategy: 2018–2023*, p. 9.

<sup>22</sup> Saskatchewan Polytechnic, *Indigenous Student Success Strategy: 2018–2023*, p. 9.

**Figure 3—Indigenous Student Success Strategy Goals**

- Nebah hoʔá (Denesuline) **Welcome**: Ensure Indigenous students attending Sask Polytech are well prepared for post-secondary life and are set up for success
- Ki-kinomawo (Nakawe) **Inspire**: Help Indigenous students thrive at Sask Polytech
- Wiyōkihiya (Dakota) **Empower**: Celebrate Indigenous student success and prepare Indigenous graduates for successful careers
- avik wiyawow (Michif) **Belong**: Create inclusive, respectful and welcoming campuses, where Indigenous students have a sense of belonging

Source: Saskatchewan Polytechnic, *Indigenous Student Success Strategy: 2018–2023*, p. 25.

In 2021–22, Sask Polytech spent \$1.35 million on activities related to its Strategy (e.g., summer transition program, honour ceremonies), and awarded 435 scholarships and awards valued at approximately \$500,000 to Indigenous students.<sup>23</sup>

## 4.2 Adequate Consultations Held with Stakeholders During Strategy Development and Update

Saskatchewan Polytechnic adequately consulted with stakeholders when it developed its *Indigenous Student Success Strategy* in 2017 and while updating the Strategy in 2023. Sask Polytech expects to release its updated Strategy by September 30, 2023.

Sask Polytech appropriately relies on the expertise of its Indigenous Strategy department staff to identify its stakeholders. Staff are involved with various community organizations (e.g., Reconciliation Saskatoon) and interact with First Nations communities and students, allowing them to identify potential stakeholders affected by the Strategy.

**Figure 4** outlines the stakeholders the Indigenous Strategy department identified for its 2023 Strategy update. We found stakeholders similar to those consulted in 2017, with a few additional stakeholders (i.e., Ministry of Advanced Education, alumni) appropriately added.

**Figure 4—Stakeholders Consulted for the 2023 Strategy Update**

- Sask Polytech students, alumni, and employees
- First Nations communities including Elders
- Ministry of Advanced Education and Ministry of Immigration and Career Training
- Municipalities (e.g., Moose Jaw, Regina, Saskatoon, Prince Albert)
- Local industry employers
- High school staff

Source: Adapted from Saskatchewan Polytechnic records.

Sask Polytech asks stakeholders to provide feedback to help it identify what works well and where it could make improvements. To gather information for Strategy development and updates, Sask Polytech met with approximately 760 stakeholders at various engagement sessions as groups and individually, including at open houses.<sup>24</sup> Stakeholders provided adequate feedback on changes needed to the Strategy from these engagement sessions. We found Sask Polytech incorporated feedback it gathered in 2017 into its current 2018–23 Strategy, and at April 2023, was in the process of gathering feedback for its next Strategy update.

<sup>23</sup> Saskatchewan Polytechnic, *Indigenous Strategy Report Card, 2021–22*, p. 16.

<sup>24</sup> Saskatchewan Polytechnic, *Indigenous Student Success Strategy 2018–2023*, p. 20.

In addition, the following four staff positions in the Indigenous Strategy department regularly interact with Indigenous students and stakeholders on an ongoing basis, which allows for informal feedback:

- **Community Liaison:** one staff member travels around Saskatchewan to meet with stakeholders (e.g., First Nations communities, prospective students, and high school staff) outside urban areas to promote Sask Polytech. During these visits, stakeholders can provide feedback on the Strategy and suggest improvements. Management told us Sask Polytech removed this position in 2020 during the pandemic given the inability for travel due to provincially imposed restrictions. The department re-established it in January 2022.
- **Indigenous Student Advisors:** seven staff regularly (e.g., daily for students and at least weekly for staff) meet with Sask Polytech students and staff. During these interactions, Advisors informally receive feedback on Indigenous student experiences at Sask Polytech. They find students still experience barriers to success (e.g., difficulty with classmates, needing assistance in applying for emergency funding).
- **Student Success Support Coaches:** two staff meet with prospective students in urban areas with Sask Polytech campuses to help support them through the application process and through their transition to post-secondary education. In November 2022, these Support Coaches averaged 640 interactions with students.
- **Indigenous Student Centre Coordinators:** four staff plan and deliver Indigenous Student Centre programming. See **Section 4.7** for more information on Indigenous Student Centres.

Sask Polytech also collects feedback through student (2021–22: 53% response rate) and alumni (2021–22: 49% response rate) annual engagement surveys. These surveys collect information on graduate employment rates and student satisfaction, including the quality of interactions with Indigenous Student Advisors. The survey also gauges Indigenous and non-Indigenous student and alumni satisfaction with their chosen study program with similarly high rates of satisfaction; see **Figure 5**.

**Figure 5—Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Student and Graduate Program Satisfaction**

	Students <sup>A</sup>		Graduates <sup>B</sup>	
	Indigenous (%)	Non-Indigenous (%)	Indigenous (%)	Non-Indigenous (%)
2020–21	88.1	87.8	94.1	94.2
2021–22	91.1	91.4	93.4	93.1

Source: Adapted from Saskatchewan Polytechnic records.

<sup>A</sup> From survey responses on the student engagement surveys: response of agree or strongly agree to the question “overall, I am satisfied with my program”.

<sup>B</sup> From survey responses on the graduate follow-up surveys: response of somewhat satisfied or very satisfied to the question “overall satisfaction with your program”.

Survey respondents indicate whether they identify as Indigenous. In the 2021–22 survey, 12% of students and 10% of graduates surveyed self-declared as Indigenous. Management uses this data to identify whether disparities in responses between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students occur, and to recognize needed changes (e.g., improve campus activities or facilities).





Sask Polytech posts its Strategy on its website, as well as brings printed copies to various events, making it widely available to the majority of stakeholders.

Having sufficient consultation during development and in updating its Indigenous Student Success Strategy helps ensure Sask Polytech understands what Indigenous students need to be successful.

## 4.3 Ongoing Indigenous Stakeholder Engagement Needed

Saskatchewan Polytechnic solicited Indigenous stakeholder feedback during its *Indigenous Student Success Strategy* development in 2017 and 2023 update. However, we did not see evidence of regular engagement with Indigenous stakeholders to obtain continuous feedback (e.g., barriers faced, community needs) and to report on results of Indigenous student success, consistent with good practice. Sask Polytech did have Indigenous student representation on its Indigenous Strategy Advisory Committee.

### 4.3.1 More Frequent Indigenous Stakeholder Engagement Needed

Our review of documentation (e.g., meeting minutes) provided by the Indigenous Strategy department showed infrequent interactions (i.e., informal discussions) with Indigenous communities. We found the department had not established the expected frequency of engagement to obtain regular feedback on the Strategy and report results of Indigenous student success.

Having regular interactions (e.g., at least quarterly) with Indigenous communities, helps establish a strong relationship with Sask Polytech, which could result in Indigenous communities recommending their members to pursue post-secondary education at the institution. This could help Sask Polytech increase its Indigenous student enrolment.

- 1. We recommend Saskatchewan Polytechnic regularly consult with Indigenous communities to obtain feedback on its strategies, and to report results on, Indigenous student success.**

### 4.3.2 Indigenous Student Representation on Key Committee

In 2023, Sask Polytech used its existing Indigenous Strategy Advisory Committee to update its *Indigenous Student Success Strategy*.

The Committee's 2022 terms of reference expects Indigenous student representation. The Committee included members of Sask Polytech's Indigenous Strategy department, members of senior management, representatives from external Indigenous partners, and an Indigenous student representative from the campus where meetings are held (i.e., student representative changed at each meeting).

The priorities for the Committee included:

- Increasing Indigenous knowledge and ways of learning in programs and curriculum
- Establishing key performance indicators for Indigenous participation in, and completion of, programs



- Formalizing early intervention strategies for Indigenous students experiencing difficulties<sup>25</sup>

Given these priorities relate directly to Indigenous student outcomes and success, it is good practice for Sask Polytech to have Indigenous student representation on the Committee to provide input.

Having Indigenous student representation on this Committee, allows Sask Polytech to capture the perspective of Indigenous students, who the Strategy is intended to support.

## 4.4 Key Barriers Identified and Addressed in Strategy

Saskatchewan Polytechnic obtained feedback from stakeholders to assist it in identifying barriers affecting Indigenous students during updates to its *Indigenous Student Success Strategy*. Its Strategy outlines appropriate actions to address them.

Sask Polytech collects feedback formally and informally from stakeholders to help identify barriers that Indigenous students experience. **Figure 6** outlines the barriers identified during stakeholder consultations in its 2017 Strategy update and how Sask Polytech's 2018–23 Strategy addressed those barriers. **Section 4.7** provides more information on each of the actions listed below.

**Figure 6—Identified Barrier and Planned Actions**

Barrier	2018–23 Strategy Planned Actions
Lack of information about available post-secondary options and low awareness of training-related career paths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advertise Sask Polytech on social media</li> <li>• Community Liaison to work with First Nations' community high school guidance counsellors and principals</li> </ul>
Insufficient academic preparedness and the inability of secondary schools in more remote areas to offer the necessary preparation and prerequisites for direct entrance into post-secondary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community Liaison to work with First Nations' community high school guidance counsellors and principals</li> <li>• Promote Adult 12 program (to obtain the equivalent of a high school diploma)</li> </ul>
Cultural and learning disconnects arising from colonial educational practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Updating program curriculum to integrate Indigenous content to 100% of programs by fall 2023 (i.e., Indigenized)</li> </ul>
Inadequate funding and high costs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Waiving application-processing fees for Indigenous students</li> <li>• Giving awards and bursaries</li> </ul>
Programs of study that do not reflect Indigenous culture, history or worldview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Updating program curriculum to integrate Indigenous content to 100% of programs by fall 2023</li> <li>• Mandatory Indigenous Awareness training for all staff</li> </ul>
Language and lack of support for those whom English is not their first language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Indigenous-designated positions (e.g., education counselor, instructor aide, English as additional language instructor)</li> </ul>
Complex admission process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Availability of Indigenous Student Advisor and Community Liaison positions to assist with application process</li> </ul>
Family responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Online learning opportunities</li> <li>• Availability of Indigenous Student Advisors</li> </ul>
Relocation to unfamiliar urban environment leading to separation from family and community networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Summer Transition Program</li> <li>• Availability of Indigenous Student Advisors</li> <li>• Indigenous Student Centre programming</li> </ul>
Lack of Indigenous faculty, staff and other role models	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Indigenous-designated positions (e.g., education counselor, instructor aide, English as additional language instructor)</li> </ul>

<sup>25</sup> Saskatchewan Polytechnic, *Aboriginal Strategy 2016–2020*, p. 2.



Barrier	2018–23 Strategy Planned Actions
Racism and discrimination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mandatory Indigenous Awareness training for all staff</li> </ul>
Lack of confidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Availability of Indigenous Student Advisors</li> <li>• Indigenous Student Centre programming</li> </ul>

Source: Adapted from *Indigenous Student Success Strategy 2018–2023*, p. 18 and *Indigenous Student Success Strategy 2021–2022 Report*, pp. 3–11.

Overall, we found Sask Polytech identified reasonable actions to make changes to address identified barriers to Indigenous student success.

Identifying and taking action on identified barriers reduces the likelihood that these barriers impede Indigenous student success.

## 4.5 Qualified Indigenous Strategy Department Staff, But Identity Verification Needed

Saskatchewan Polytechnic’s Indigenous Strategy department has adequately trained staff to support the implementation of its *Indigenous Student Success Strategy*. However, it does not require staff who self-declare as Indigenous to provide proof of heritage.

As of February 2023, the Indigenous Strategy department consisted of 16 people. Of these 16 people, 81% self-declared as Indigenous. A Director oversees the department.

Sask Polytech provides its staff with adequate training opportunities throughout the year. It provides mandatory Indigenous Awareness Training for all staff that helps to provide history and context on Canada’s relationship with Indigenous peoples. We found this course provides staff with adequate information. Sask Polytech also offers courses to staff through its internal self-directed learning site used to develop competency in appropriately and respectfully teaching Indigenous content.

We reviewed job descriptions for all jobs within the Indigenous Strategy department, and found job responsibilities consistent with our understanding of the role based on discussions with management, and required competencies were appropriate to be able to meet the job responsibilities. For example, the Community Liaison position requires staff to have professional credibility in Indigenous communities and educational circles, and strong presentation skills.

Sask Polytech determined Indigenous staff should hold certain positions directly involved in supporting Indigenous students, which applies to 25 positions at Sask Polytech, including all positions within the Indigenous Strategy department. Sask Polytech does not currently have a policy requiring verification when staff self-declare as Indigenous; however, it does require verification for students who self-declare as Indigenous (e.g., provide treaty status card, health card) to qualify for Indigenous scholarships or Indigenous-specific services.

A number of recent high-profile instances at Canadian post-secondary institutions where individuals benefited from making false claims of Indigenous identity profiled the need for identity verification. Using only self-identification for Indigenous-designated positions, jobs or other opportunities may not be reliable. False identity claims can affect institutional trust and negatively impact reputation.

2. We recommend Saskatchewan Polytechnic verify the Indigenous identity of staff in Indigenous-designated positions.

## 4.6 Strategy Lacks Some Key Measures and Targets for Indigenous Students

Saskatchewan Polytechnic established some Indigenous student-specific targets (i.e., graduation rates), but lacks key measures and targets around Indigenous student enrolment and retention (e.g., student satisfaction with learning environment).

Sask Polytech has an IT system that provides sufficient detail for Indigenous Strategy department staff to track Indigenous student success. However, as of March 2023, department staff were just training on the use of this IT system. Once fully utilized, this IT system will allow department staff to see real-time data on the success of Indigenous students (e.g., graduation rates, enrolment) and other measures supporting the success of Indigenous students (e.g., Indigenous student awards earned).

Sask Polytech tracks several relevant measures to evaluate Indigenous student success (see **Figure 7** for established measures, targets and actual results). Results show the number of Indigenous students enrolled in Sask Polytech has declined since 2020, while the percentage of Indigenous graduates who obtain employment has increased.

Sask Polytech established an associated target for only one key performance measure (i.e., striving for a graduation rate of 65% for Indigenous students by 2025). The other five measures do not have set targets. Sask Polytech also does not separately track results for one of the key performance measures for Indigenous students (i.e., student satisfaction with learning environment).

**Figure 7—Key Measures, Targets, and Actual Results for Indigenous Student Success**

Goal	Performance Measure	Indigenous Student Target <sup>A</sup>	2019–20	2020–21	2021–22
<b>Enrolment</b>					
Improve inclusion	Indigenous program enrolment (# of students enrolled)	None	3,203	2,523	2,286
<b>Retention</b>					
Improve processes & services	Program retention rates (%)	None	71 <sup>B</sup>	70 <sup>B</sup>	64 <sup>B</sup>
Improve learner experience	Student satisfaction with learning environment	None	N/A <sup>C</sup>	N/A <sup>C</sup>	N/A <sup>C</sup>
<b>Graduation Rates</b>					
Advance learner success	Graduation rate (%)	>= 65 by 2025	63	61	63
	Graduate employment rate (%)	None	83	86	94
Improve learner experience	Graduate overall satisfaction with program (%)	None	94	94	93

Source: Adapted from Saskatchewan Polytechnic records.

<sup>A</sup> For Indigenous Student Target column, "None" indicates Sask Polytech has not established a target.

<sup>B</sup> Sask Polytech does not include program retention rates for Indigenous students in external reporting, but tracks this metric internally.

<sup>C</sup> Sask Polytech has data to calculate this metric, but does not include the results in external reporting or track this metric internally.



Not establishing targets for all key measures of Indigenous student success (e.g., enrolment, retention), increases the risk that Sask Polytech may not identify a disparity in outcomes between non-Indigenous and Indigenous students. Additionally, not establishing targets or tracking results makes it difficult to assess whether the Strategy is working, or adjustments are needed, to improve the success of Indigenous students.

**3. We recommend Saskatchewan Polytechnic enhance and report on key performance measures and targets specific to Indigenous student success.**

## 4.7 Sufficient Supports for Indigenous Students Established and Implemented

Saskatchewan Polytechnic implemented several initiatives to support Indigenous student success.

When determining which initiatives Sask Polytech can implement in a given year, it relies on its budgeting process. In 2022–23, the Indigenous Strategy department had an approved budget of \$1.9 million.<sup>26</sup>

If the department realizes it will not have adequate funding to incorporate all planned initiatives, or if it wants to incorporate a new initiative, the department prepares business cases outlining the request for additional funding. We saw evidence of Sask Polytech approving additional funding for two new positions (i.e., Indigenous Strategy Coaches) within the department in December 2020. These positions work with Indigenous students as they transition from high school to post secondary and connect students with the needed supports. We found that Sask Polytech has an appropriate process to allow for additional staffing or other funding when needed.

In 2021–22, Sask Polytech's *Indigenous Student Success Strategy* outlined several services to Indigenous students as shown in **Figure 8**.

**Figure 8—2021–22 Indigenous Student Success Strategy Services**

- Indigenous Student Advisors
- Summer Transition Program
- Honour ceremonies
- Community engagement and outreach
- Indigenous Student Success Coaches
- Funded applications
- Elder access
- Men's sharing circle (opportunity for male students to meet, discuss challenges, and build community)
- Indigenous art (in public spaces on campuses)
- Role model calendar (calendar with interviews from successful Indigenous graduates)
- 10 days of holiday giveaways and holiday hampers
- Curriculum update to include Indigenous content
- Representative workforce
- Training and awareness for Sask Polytech staff
- Indigenous Student Centres
- Community partnerships and outreach
- Curricula Indigenization

Source: *Indigenous Student Success Strategy 2021–2022 Report*, pp. 3–11.

<sup>26</sup> Saskatchewan Polytechnic financial records.

We identified and evaluated the reasonableness of some key initiatives undertaken by the Indigenous Strategy department to improve the success of Indigenous students as follows.

#### 4.7.1 Indigenous Strategy Department Staff Engagement

In 2021–22, Indigenous Strategy department staff attended five career fairs and visited five high schools to meet prospective students and make them aware of the services Sask Polytech offers (e.g., personalized support for Indigenous students).

Once Indigenous students enroll in a program, Department staff contact each Indigenous student to make them aware of the services available (e.g., emergency funding bursaries, counselling services, tutoring). We also found the Department used its social media pages effectively to advertise upcoming events (e.g., Indigenous-specific honour ceremony). We found the processes used by the Indigenous Strategy department adequate to ensure all Indigenous students are made aware of available services.

#### 4.7.2 Summer Transition Program

Prior to each fall semester, the Indigenous Strategy department holds a Summer Transition Program for new Indigenous students. This Program has students attend campus a few weeks prior to classes beginning to become familiar with the campus, ask Indigenous Student Advisors any questions and assist Indigenous students with any barriers they experience (e.g., finding child care, applying for financial assistance). In August 2022, 82 Indigenous students attended the Summer Transition Program.

By taking reasonable action to make students aware of services available, the Indigenous Strategy department helps to ensure that Indigenous students can access needed services.

#### 4.7.3 Indigenous Student Centres

Each Sask Polytech campus has an Indigenous Student Centre delivering services and programming to students. **Figure 9** outlines examples of the cultural and community events the centres host throughout the year to help Sask Polytech build relationships between Indigenous students and staff. These centres also serve to connect students with other services available on campus (e.g., learning services, library). Management told us Indigenous Student Centres made approximately 10,500 contacts with students in 2021–22.

**Figure 9—Examples of Events and Activities Available through Indigenous Student Centres**

- Lunch and Learn (Cree for Beginners, Employability Skills)
- Cultural Activities (smudging, ribbon-skirt making, Indigenous storytelling, beading with Elder)
- Community Building (meals, bingo, trivia)
- Mental Health Supports (journaling, wellness discussion)
- Days of Recognition (Louis Riel Day, Orange Shirt Day, National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, National Day of Awareness for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit)

Source: Adapted from Saskatchewan Polytechnic records.

Providing these services to Indigenous Sask Polytech students provides a sense of community, and will assist in student retention.



#### 4.7.4 Community Partnerships and Outreach

We found Sask Polytech established adequate agreements with six local Indigenous communities setting out future opportunities for programming or research collaborations between Sask Polytech and the community. One example would be New Southern Plains Métis Local 160 and Sask Polytech established a framework for collaboration to support Métis in the city of Moose Jaw and create initiatives to encourage Métis culture in the Saskatchewan education system.<sup>27</sup>

#### 4.7.5 Funded Applications

During its 2017 Strategy update, feedback from stakeholders noted students experienced financial pressures, which contributed to lower Indigenous student enrolment. In response, Sask Polytech began piloting funded applications in 2020–21.<sup>28</sup> In October 2021, Sask Polytech funded the application fee for 100 prospective students. In February 2022, Sask Polytech funded an additional 236 Indigenous applicants.<sup>29</sup> Application fees are \$75 for an online application and \$100 for a paper application. We found waiving the application-processing fee is a reasonable action to help address financial barriers that may prevent students from applying, and ultimately enrolling.

#### 4.7.6 Services from Elders

Sask Polytech adequately contracts with Elders to provide services to its Indigenous students. Indigenous Student Centres on each campus provide students with the opportunity to meet with Elders. We found Sask Polytech developed adequate guidelines for contracting services of Elders. Sask Polytech's guidelines include information on how to greet and make a request to an Elder for services, and outlines the selection process and compensation. We found Sask Polytech followed its established guidelines when contracting for services from Elders (e.g., honorarium rates consistent with the guidelines).

#### 4.7.7 Curricula Indigenization

Sask Polytech set the goal of Indigenizing 100% of its programs by fall 2023. Indigenous content can support non-Indigenous people to gain skills and knowledge to enable them to live and work with Indigenous people respectfully. We found Sask Polytech developed new learning objectives to indigenize 62 of 158 programs as of March 2023.<sup>30,31</sup> We found the changes made to course content consistent with good practice (e.g., Psychology of Health and Wellness Management course includes Indigenous teachings of the medicine wheel). Representation through Indigenous content can help to foster a stronger sense of belonging for Indigenous students, and Indigenous staff and faculty can act as role models for students and help support accurate teaching of Indigenous content in the curriculum.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>27</sup> *Indigenous Student Success Strategy Report 2021–2022*, p. 14.

<sup>28</sup> For funded applications, to ease financial burdens experienced by students, Sask Polytech waives the application-processing fee it typically charges.

<sup>29</sup> *Indigenous Student Success Strategy Report 2021–2022*, p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> Indigenization is the holistic integration of Indigenous ways of knowing, teaching and learning. (Adapted from Sask Polytech document).

<sup>31</sup> Adapted from Sask Polytech records.

<sup>32</sup> Indspire, *Holding Our Ground: Indigenous Student Post-Secondary Persistence & Early Leaving*, 2021, p. 9. [www.indspire.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Holding-Our-Ground-Report-EN-Final-WEB1.pdf](http://www.indspire.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Holding-Our-Ground-Report-EN-Final-WEB1.pdf) (20 April 2023).

Additionally, every 5–6 years, all Sask Polytech courses go through a process to update curricula, including incorporating Indigenous content. We evaluated Sask Polytech's process to review program content and considered learning objectives for a sample of programs Sask Polytech had updated to incorporate Indigenous content. We found the process and learning objectives consistent with good practice.

Having sufficient supports helps ensure Sask Polytech addresses barriers that could prevent Indigenous students from being successful.

## 4.8 Thresholds Needed to Address Fluctuations in Key Performance Measures

Saskatchewan Polytechnic has established various types of internal reporting to help it monitor Indigenous student success. However, it needs to establish thresholds for when to investigate changes or fluctuations in key performance measures.

Sask Polytech prepares an annual report on its *Indigenous Student Success Strategy*. It made the most recent reports available on its website. These reports include a description of the activities and initiatives undertaken in the previous year, and statistics on Indigenous student enrolments and graduation rates. In its *2020–21 Indigenous Student Success Strategy Report*, Sask Polytech provided sufficient analysis by program of the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on Indigenous student enrolments.<sup>33</sup>

Sask Polytech's overall annual report also included similar statistics. In its *2021–22 Annual Report*, Sask Polytech included a detailed breakdown of the enrolment numbers for each type of program it offered to the overall student population (e.g., basic education, apprenticeship, certificate/diploma/degree). We noted the *2021–22 Indigenous Student Success Strategy Report* included the Indigenous student equivalent of this breakdown.

For internal analysis and reporting, and its reporting to the Ministry of Advanced Education, Sask Polytech also prepares an annual *Indigenous Strategy Report Card*. We found this Report Card included several metrics relevant to the assessment of Indigenous students and activities to support Indigenous students. As noted in **Recommendation 3**, Sask Polytech needs to implement targets to be able to perform meaningful analysis of the impact its initiatives have on improving Indigenous student success.

In addition to not having established targets, the Indigenous Strategy department has not established thresholds for when to investigate changes in key performance measures. For example, Indigenous program enrolments fell by almost 30% from 3,203 in 2019 to 2,286 in 2021 (see **Figure 7**). We expected Sask Polytech to document its evaluation of the reason for the decline and establish actions to help improve enrolment. It has not done so.

Not having established thresholds increases the risk that Sask Polytech may not identify, or identify in a timely way, when changes or actions are needed to address fluctuating trends that affect Indigenous student success.

### 4. We recommend Saskatchewan Polytechnic establish thresholds for when to investigate and take action on unexpected changes in key performance measures related to Indigenous student success.

<sup>33</sup> *Indigenous Student Success Strategy 2020–2021 Report*, p. 63. [www.saskpolytech.ca/student-services/support/indigenous/documents/indigenous-student-success-strategy-report-2021-22.pdf](http://www.saskpolytech.ca/student-services/support/indigenous/documents/indigenous-student-success-strategy-report-2021-22.pdf) (20 April 2023).





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