HUMAN-CENTRED
>>>>**CREATIVE**
AUDACIOUS

IMPROVING GRADUATION RATES AND SUCCESSFUL OUTCOMES FOR INDIGENOUS STUDENTS

BRIEF PRESENTED TO THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

March 31, 2023

UQAT
UNIVERSITÉ DU QUÉBEC
EN ABITIBI-TÉMISCAMINGUE

General description of UQAT

Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue (UQAT) is a human-centred, creative and audacious francophone university that has demonstrated tremendous strength in teaching, research and creation within its home region for nearly 40 years.

Since UQAT was founded, it has always sought to involve Indigenous peoples in its development. UQAT was the first university to include a specific goal dedicated to Indigenous peoples in its 2004-2008 strategic plan and has continued to establish such goals, as evidenced by goal 04 in its 2020-2025 strategic plan: To forge our future together with First Peoples. In January 2019, UQAT also launched its *2019-2024 Action Plan – UQAT and Indigenous Peoples*. These institutional commitments facilitated the realization of several initiatives, including:

- Construction of the First Peoples Pavilion
- Launch of the First Peoples Service
- Holding seminars on the ethics of research with Indigenous peoples
- Creation of the School of Indigenous Studies
- Creation of the position of Strategic Advisor for Reconciliation and Indigenous Education
- Launch of the Mamawi Mikimodan (Acting Together) Service
- Creation of the position of Vice-Rector, Reconciliation, Partnerships and International Development
- Indigenization of the Bachelor of Preschool and Elementary Education program.

Profile of Indigenous students

UQAT's presence in the region has facilitated its ability to offer university programs geared toward the needs of Indigenous communities and partners. To date, UQAT has awarded nearly 1,000 degrees to Indigenous students.

The Indigenous population at UQAT is registered in undergraduate, master's and PhD programs, but for the past decade, most students have enrolled in master's and PhD programs. The creation of the School of Indigenous Studies in 2016 continues to have a significant impact on the number of Indigenous students enrolled in UQAT's graduate and postgraduate programs. Depending on the programs offered at each campus and those offered directly within communities, the number of students fluctuates from year to year and could range from roughly one hundred to over two hundred. The vast majority of the Indigenous student population is made up of mothers who decided to return to school; they are also first-generation students admitted to the university on the basis of relevant experience and therefore do not have a college diploma. This partly explains why this student population requires specific support services that are both culturally appropriate and safe. Indeed, this support is not only intended to help them thrive in their role as university students, but also to help them upgrade their language skills, since this student population is often studying in a second or even a third language.

A challenging postsecondary pathway: an overview of the literature

Indigenous students face numerous challenges when they start their postsecondary education. Indigenous students are apparently left with the impression that Indigenous cultures and perspectives do not have a place in academic programs (Holmes, 2006). Indigenous values and traditions are not recognized in the vast majority of education and training programs (Association of Canadian Community Colleges, 2005; RCAP, 1996; Malatest et al, 2004), if not devalued (Malatest et al, 2002). Moreover, as highlighted in the above-referenced literature, these programs also fail to give due consideration to the work environment in which these students will apply their knowledge and professional skills (RCAP, 1996; Malatest et al, 2004). Consequently, these programs are a little too detached from the students' reality, either because of standardized content or the language of instruction prioritized (English and French). This often prevents the students from successfully completing their programs (RCAP, 1996).

Family-related factors also come into play. Most students who enrol in college or university are women with a family household (Cazin, 2005; Malatest et al, 2004). These women are required to care for their families while keeping up with their academic work. These students are often more inclined to reconsider their academic plans in order to fulfill their family obligations. Consequently, child care services, family support and financial resources become determinants of success and perseverance (Association of Canadian Community Colleges, 2010).

Studies on Indigenous learners and postsecondary education demonstrate that a lack of academic preparation leads to significant academic challenges (Association of Canadian Community Colleges, 2010; Holmes, 2006; Malatest et al, 2004). Many students therefore become frustrated and discouraged, because they are aware of their shortcomings and the fact that they need to catch up academically while also taking their courses. Indigenous students are not prepared for postsecondary school life and the demands of being college or university students, because most lack a secondary school diploma (Association of Canadian Community Colleges, 2005; Holmes, 2006), and the quality of education offered in their communities is inconsistent (Holmes, 2006; Mendelson, 2006).

Some economic factors (poverty, unemployment) also make the university experience more challenging for many Indigenous students. Financial difficulties faced by students can be attributed to the high cost of living, school-related expenses (Association of Canadian Community Colleges, 2010; Mendelson, 2006) and most of all, inadequate funding allocated to Indigenous communities for postsecondary programs (Association of Canadian Community Colleges, 2005; Colomb, 2012; First Nations Education Council, 2009, 2010; RCAP, 1996). This lack of funding particularly affects many Indigenous students on waiting lists to receive funding so that they can pursue a postsecondary education (First Nations Education Council, 2009). It is important to remember that most Indigenous students in Canada come from underprivileged backgrounds (Holmes, 2006), so they cannot rely on financial support from their families, when these families have limited resources to meet their own needs. For their part, Indigenous students living off reserve have to contend with difficulties finding part-time employment and may also have limited access to financial assistance from their home community.

Lastly, various other publications identify other challenges, such as discrimination and isolation, that make the academic experience more challenging. The lack of Indigenous career role models (Malatest et al, 2004; Mendelson, 2006), the lack of control over postsecondary education by Indigenous peoples (Mendelson, 2006) and the fact that educators have little or no knowledge of First Nations cultures (Malatest et al, 2004) are other factors that weigh heavily on students' educational experience. There are also geographic barriers, as many Indigenous students must leave their communities and move to urban settings, forcing them to find housing and adapt to the cost of living in a city (Association of Canadian Community Colleges, 2010).

Recommendations

In light of these findings, UQAT is suggesting the following recommendations in order to improve graduation rates and successful outcomes for Indigenous students:

1. Respond to the various calls to action concerning education already set out in reports by various commissions of inquiry in Canada and Quebec (see Appendix 1).

2. Increase funding allocated to Indigenous students and the educational institutions they attend.

3. Implement measures to encourage postsecondary educational institutions to hire Indigenous employees.

4. Offer culturally appropriate services for Indigenous students.

5. Adopt teaching methods based on a holistic approach to Indigenous education and learning, which put a central focus on Indigenous cultures, knowledge and languages.

6. Create real partnerships with Indigenous communities and organizations so that Indigenous peoples are involved not only in the development of programs and services, but also in research.

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The *AFNQL Action Plan on Racism and Discrimination: Engaging With First Nations Against Racism and Discrimination* made recommendations for several stakeholders in Quebec society, including educators, that align with the various calls to action and calls for justice presented in a number of reports concerning Indigenous peoples.

Recommendations in the AFNQL Action Plan on racism and discrimination
EDUCATION **12.** Provide training developed in cooperation with Indigenous authorities that promotes cultural sensitivity, cultural competence, and cultural safeguards to all public service managers, professionals and employees who are likely to interact with Indigenous peoples. Out of respect for the cultural diversity of Indigenous nations, this training must be adapted to the specific Indigenous nation(s) with which the employees interact. (CERP #25-26-75) (MMIWG #17.8, 18.8, 18.9) **13.** Include a component on Quebec First Nations and Inuit in professional programs at colleges and universities (medicine, social work, law, journalism, and other programs), in collaboration with Indigenous authorities. (CERP #23, 24, 25, 26) (TRC 23iii, 24) (MMIWG 10.1) **14.** In collaboration with educational organizations and institutions, provide awareness and education programs at all elementary, secondary, and post-secondary schools and school boards on the historical and current truths about the genocide of Indigenous peoples through laws, policies, and colonial practices of the government. It should include, but not be limited to, teaching Indigenous history, law, and practices from Indigenous perspectives. Raise awareness about the historical and current truths about the genocide of Indigenous people arising from the application of colonial laws, policies, and practices of the state, through the development of curricula and programs in partnership with Indigenous people. Certain awareness and education programs should be aimed at children and young people on solicitation techniques for sexual and other types of exploitation. (MMIWG #7.9, 11.2). (CERP #21, 22) (MMIWG Q #9, 11.1, 16.25, 17.24) **15.** Mobilize the educational sector to reduce the gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in terms of academic success. (TRC #7, 10 ii-iii, 23 i-ii)

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