

It is important to remember that education is a powerful social system. At its best, this power can be used to address systemic inequalities. At its worst, it can be used to perpetuate and legitimize these inequalities. To harness the power of education as a force for good, it is essential to both highlight positive actions in this space while shining a light on the areas where we must improve.

NorQuest's commitment to Indigenous learners

At NorQuest, we aspire to be a place where people come to transform their lives and find a place to belong. We believe it is our duty to ensure there is a path for every learner who comes to us. It is not enough to acknowledge the need to change. We must identify areas for improvement and take tangible action to deliver that change. Since 2017, NorQuest College has committed itself to reconciliation and to decolonization through our first-ever Indigenization Strategy, *Wahkohotwin*. Following a review of this strategy in 2019, an Indigenous Imperative Roadmap was created to advance and elevate the distinct and unique needs of Indigenous people.

Indigenous leaders at NorQuest are building and testing ground-breaking models and decolonial possibilities in higher education. These efforts have centred around three interrelated but distinct areas of focus: equity in admissions, improved course completion, and elevating Indigenous knowledge systems within curriculum and pedagogy.

Equity in admissions

Institutions often ask applicants to navigate complex structures and complicated processes, creating unnecessary challenges that stand between learners and opportunity. This process is far from intuitive for many prospective learners. Combined with the financial barriers facing many Indigenous learners, the admissions process can present a formidable barrier to entry. NorQuest has sought to make this process more equitable in a variety of ways. These include introducing admissions floors which reserve a set number of seats in high-demand programs for Indigenous learners; removing the application fee for current and prospective Indigenous learners applying to NorQuest programs, introducing Open Admissions Pathways for learners who do not meet admissions requirements, and working with Indspire and private donors to increase the availability of financial assistance for Indigenous learners at NorQuest College.

These changes have already had significant impacts at NorQuest College. During the 2016-17 academic year, 55% of Indigenous applicants were successfully enrolled in a NorQuest program. By 2020-21, that number grew to 73%. This demonstrates how important it is for post-secondary institutions across Canada to evaluate their admissions process and actively work to remove systemic barriers which prevent Indigenous learners from entering the post-secondary system.

Improved course completion

While we are proud of the work done to make our admissions process more equitable, access is only one part of the equation. Ensuring that Indigenous learners can learn in an inclusive environment with the supports they need to be successful is just as important. Although NorQuest cannot guarantee the success of any individual learner, we have actively sought to understand the factors which influence course completion rates among Indigenous learners. This includes shifting the focus away from Indigenous learners to our internal policies, processes, and procedures to ensure we can make systemic changes to support and advance the needs of the learners themselves. This learner-centered approach recognizes the overlapping systemic and structural barriers that Indigenous learners experience. In doing so, attention is pivoted away from superficial inclusion efforts to substantive changes that work to include rather than exclude. In doing so, we hope to increase the likelihood of success for Indigenous learners.

Elevating Indigenous knowledge systems within curriculum and pedagogy

Among the changes made in response to the findings from our internal analysis was the decision to de-centralize our Indigenous Relations and Supports and to create an Indigenous House of Learning portfolio. This area is actively working towards ensuring NorQuest College is a leader in Indigenous people's education. To achieve this critical goal, the Indigenous House of Learning is focused on ensuring that Indigenous knowledge is recognized as legitimate, valued, and foundational. This includes work to understand our faculty environments and determining how we can ensure that Indigenous knowledge systems are elevated within our curriculum and pedagogy across the organization.

All these activities remain active and ongoing. Achieving substantive change in this area requires a significant investment of time, effort, and resources along with a recognition that this process is an ongoing journey which will continue to evolve and develop with time. Through it all, our focus remains on changing what we can to increase the likelihood of success of both this generation and future generations of Indigenous learners.

A federal role in supporting Academic Upgrading for Indigenous learners

Given the number of Indigenous learners who leave the K-12 education system without a credential, Academic Upgrading represents a significant opportunity to begin improving the academic outcomes for Indigenous learners. However, existing funding mechanisms do not provide adequate access to Academic Upgrading for Indigenous learners, most notably for First Nations learners on-reserve. By providing additional funding directly to

First Nations and Indigenous organizations to facilitate access to Academic Upgrading, the Government of Canada could take a significant step toward closing the persistent educational achievement gap observed among this population. This initiative must not result in the diversion of funding from First Nations and other Indigenous organizations. Instead, this effort should be led by these entities, with the post-secondary sector serving as a collaborative delivery partner.

The Government of Alberta Learner Enrolment Reporting System shows that **2,135 Indigenous learners accessed Academic Upgrading in Alberta during the 2021-22 academic year**. We anticipate this number will trend slightly downwards through the end of the current academic year as the labour market tightens, before beginning to increase steadily through to 2030.

In 2021-22, domestic students in Alberta paid an average of \$3,208 in tuition and fees for Academic Upgrading. However, the real cost to students would include additional costs for necessary items like books and technology access. This suggests **the true costs to Academic Upgrading learners is much closer to \$4,200**. This does not include living expenses.

Inclusive of this modest sum for books and technology access, **NorQuest estimates that the total cost to Indigenous Academic Upgrading learners in Alberta was \$9.0M in 2021-2022. When accounting for modest inflation and tuition increases, we project this cost will rise to \$12.7M by 2030**. This would apply to all Indigenous learners, including First Nations (on-reserve and off-reserve) Metis and Inuit.

We believe that if the federal government were to cover this cost, in whole or in part, to pay for Academic Upgrading for Indigenous learners in Alberta, it would provide a greater incentive for more Indigenous adults to pursue this opportunity.

Sincerely,



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