OVERVIEW REPORT OF THE

2021-2022 UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY DIALOGUE SESSIONS

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Table of Contents

I. INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

In early 2021, the Office of the Vice President (Indigenous), University of Manitoba convened a series of listening sessions to examine ways that the University could better meet the needs of First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nation students and build better relations with the wider Indigenous community. Eight listening sessions were organized by theme or by the experiences of different sectors of the Indigenous community. The eight sessions were:

- ➢ Post-secondary education program coordinators employed by Indigenous peoples;
- ➢ Indigenous students;
- ➢ Indigenous peoples or organizations working to promote languages and cultures;
- ➢ Elders and Knowledge Keepers working with the University;
- ➢ Elders and Knowledge Keepers from the community;
- ➢ 2SLGBTQIAA+ students;
- ➢ Students with disabilities; and
- ➢ High school guidance counsellors.

One of the consistent themes of these sessions was a call for continued dialogue between the University and the Indigenous community.

In 2022, the Office followed up by organizing a series of 11 additional dialogue sessions which were held between March and June. Participants included Elders and Knowledge Keepers, guidance counsellors, staff and student support workers from First Nations, Inuit and Métis governments, organizations, recent graduates, and community leaders. The dialogue sessions were organized around the following themes:

- ➢ Community service projects;
- ➢ Cultural and community competency training for faculty and staff;
- ➢ Building good relationships;
- ➢ Supporting Indigenous learners;
- ➢ Supporting community economic growth;
- ➢ Pre-University preparation;
- ➢ Extra-curricular learning opportunities;
- ➢ Creating pathways to post-Secondary education;
- ➢ Connecting Indigenous students with labour market opportunities; and
- ➢ Supporting community research and evaluation.

In addition, an open session was held in which participants spoke to their own priorities and concerns. In each session, the University shared concerns and strategies highlighted in the earlier listening sessions and asked participants to discuss further how these strategies would be best implemented.

This overview report summarizes four of the themes most frequently raised over the course of the 2011 and 2022 sessions. These themes are preparation for post-secondary education, accessing post-secondary education from Indigenous communities, creating culturally safe

spaces for Indigenous student success, and building good relations between the University and Indigenous governments, communities and organizations.

These and other themes of discussion are set out in greater detail in the reports prepared for each individual session.

II.   PREPARATION FOR POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

In all the sessions, participants emphasized the importance of the University being more proactive in engaging with Indigenous communities and with prospective students. Regular, ongoing engagement is necessary to build good working relations and ensure open lines of communication with community-based organizations, teachers and other staff who best understand student needs and concerns. Regular, repeated contact with the University also helps builds student confidence that they can succeed in post-secondary education.

Contact with prospective students should begin early, at the Grade 9 level or sooner. Reaching out to students earlier helps avoid the inevitable time-crunch that many students feel when they are presented with post-secondary options in their final years of high school. Participants emphasized that the University needs to be upfront and candid with students about the challenges they may experience so that they can begin thinking about how to overcome those challenges.

Along with University representatives visiting schools, there should be opportunities for Indigenous students to visit the University campus. In addition to campus tours or open houses, participants highlighted the value of holding activities on campus, such as cultural events or study camps on specific subjects, that appeal to Indigenous youth and help them feel comfortable and connected. A number of high schools already offer a Post-Secondary Club where someone from the University meets students over lunch once a month. Similarly, the Pathways to Education initiative brings students and healthcare professions to talk informally over a meal.

Participants also emphasized the importance of Indigenous youth being exposed to a greater diversity of education and career options. One participant said, "All we ever see posted are social work, nursing, and teaching degrees. What about conservation, writing and literature, art, and music?"

It is important that Indigenous youth see that there is space for Indigenous peoples in the University and that the University values Indigenous cultures and knowledge systems. Early engagement efforts should involve Indigenous faculty, staff and students. One idea is to host speaker series in high schools where Indigenous people talk about their own careers and journeys. Youth also need to be exposed to the role of Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers in the University and the how Indigenous knowledge systems are being incorporated into research and learning.

Outreach should be carried out using every available tool, including through approaches made possible by social media. Social media could be used to show "a day in the life" of a student on campus, introduce different educational and career paths and offer tips for life on campus.

Participants noted that preparatory and orientation activities for students entering university are typically scheduled over the summer when many students are trying to rejuvenate and reconnect with their families and friends. This is particularly a challenge for students who have had to leave their communities to complete high school and are particularly focus on being home during the months following high school graduation. Participants advocated for holding orientation sessions in April and May when students are still in high school.

Participants also discussed strategies for overcoming structural barriers to enrollment. Some commented that a three-to-four-year program can feel like an overwhelming, even impossible commitment. Others highlighted barriers created by the fact that course prerequisites for entry into certain post-secondary programs are often not offered at the high schools in Indigenous communities. Furthermore, youth in the care system often have gaps in their education because of interruptions to their time in school. Participants suggested a number of alternatives to the current enrollment system, including micro-credentialing and the option to complete prerequisites in parallel with other course work. Noting the need for more supports for Indigenous high students to meet admission standards in subjects like calculus or applied math and sciences, some participants suggested that tutoring programs would be an effective way to build a relationship with the University and peer mentors.

Indigenous students are often discouraged by the process of registering for courses. First come first served enrollment lists, or the priority given to students with higher grades, can frustrate Indigenous students who can't access courses of greatest interest to them or which they know are necessary to completing a program in a timely way. Participants said registration and application fees are also discouraging, particularly if there is no guarantee of being accepted. Participants suggested staggered enrollment periods, holding a certain number of positions for Indigenous students, and waiving fees or offering refunds if the student does not attend.

Participants noted that many Indigenous students begin their educational journeys some years after leaving high school, at a time when they may be caring for children of their own, or have additional responsibilities for their families, such as caring for aging parents and other relatives. Income support, and managing costs of education such as tuition, fees, and textbooks are a particularly critical issue for these adult learners. Here, again, the importance of flexible enrollment options was also emphasized.

III.   ACCESSING POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION FROM INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

The shift of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the viability of expanding Indigenous students' access to post-secondary education from their own communities. Remote and online learning can help remove many of the social and economic barriers to attending post-secondary educational institutions. However, participants also noted that even when the option of remote learning is offered, there are still structural barriers that must be remedied, including the high cost and limited availability of internet connectivity in many communities.

Students engaged in remote learning can feel isolated or lose out on the encouragement and mentorship that is ideally part of being in the university community. It was recommended that the University build cohorts across Indigenous communities so that students in the same course of study have the chance to meet each other online and have opportunities to collaborate.

Many participants also encouraged the University to move beyond the model of online learning and look for ways that a wider range of courses and programmes can be offered in Indigenous communities. Community-based learning offers greater opportunity to engage Elders and Knowledge Keepers in the design and delivery of courses and to bring more elements of experiential and land-based learning into classes. Community-based learning may also make it easier to incorporate elements of community service into course work.

The discussions emphasized that many Indigenous students are more responsive to hands-on, culturally-based ways of teaching. Experiential learning helps instill pride and restore connections to Indigenous students' cultures and to the lives and experiences of older generations. Experiential learning can also be a powerful way for students to make positive contributions to their own communities.

The discussions also highlighted community-based courses and programmes as a way to invest in Indigenous communities. Participants suggested that when Indigenous students complete at least part of their degrees in their own communities, they are more likely to bring their knowledge and skills back to the community when they graduate.

Participants also said that community-based courses would benefit faculty and staff, as well as non-Indigenous students, by providing opportunities to learn from Indigenous communities and potentially build longer term relationships. Some participants raised the idea of hybrid approaches, in which faculty might travel to different communities to co-present lectures that would be available in person and online.

IV.   CREATING CULTURALLY SAFE SPACES FOR INDIGENOUS STUDENT SUCCESS

Many Indigenous students feel overwhelmed when they leave their communities and experience campus and city living for the first time. One student who participated in these sessions described the University as a "cold" and "unwelcoming" space. Participants also talked about the violence and racism experienced by Indigenous people when they leave their home communities. Students won't ask questions, or connect to the services and supports they need, if they are uncomfortable and unsafe. For Indigenous students, the opportunity to connect with others from their own culture, to practice familiar traditions, and to see their cultures reflected in campus life, are all essential dimensions of cultural safety.

Participants said that "Indigenizing" courses and programs requires more than a small amount of content in selected courses. Indigenous knowledge and cultures should permeate all programs. This includes integrating Indigenous science, technology and worldviews into STEM courses.

Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers have an important role to play as educators. This requires recognizing their expertise and years of training and preparation. Participants said Elders and Knowledge Keepers should be full partners in course delivery and their contributions should be considered on an equal level with other faculty. It was noted that Elders are not eligible for tenure or sabbaticals, even though in many cases their teaching responsibilities are comparable to other faculty. It was also noted that the University cannot rely exclusively on Elders in residence for teaching, as they already have many other roles and responsibilities in campus. It is important to have good relations with the community to be able to identify and bring in additional Elders, or have visiting Elders. There also needs to be training for University faculty and staff on how to work appropriately and respectfully with the Elders.

In addition to the classroom, Indigenous cultures need to be more visible throughout the whole campus. Representation of Indigenous cultures such as in artwork, signage and building design shouldn't be limited to specific locations designated for Indigenous students or Indigenous cultural activities. When Indigenous cultures are siloed into particular locations, this only reinforces the colonial marginalization of Indigenous peoples.

Participants said that it is important to be mindful of the diversity of Indigenous cultures and identities. Some participants noted that, while there are many pan-Indigenous student groups, the specific needs of Métis, Inuit and specific First Nations can be overlooked. Inuit students, in particular, do not see themselves reflected in the University. There are few talks about Inuit culture and few Inuit cultural events. There should me more opportunities for staff and students to learn about Inuit culture. Training and events should be led by Inuit who have knowledge and who can speak to Inuit culture.

It was pointed out that Indigenous 2SLGBTQIAA+ youth need a place where they can feel safe to celebrate their lives and feel part of a community. It was also noted that pronouns and names are a major issue at universities. A legal name change is expensive, complex and time consuming. There need to be ways for students to indicate their chosen or spirit name and for that name to be honoured, regardless of how they are legally identified. This should not be an onerous task for students and should not make Two Spirit students feel singled out.

Participants emphasized that it was important not to make assumptions about the cultural supports and opportunities that will be meaningful or desirable to individual students. Not all Indigenous students are knowledgeable of, interested in, or motivated to learn about their traditions and culture. Everyone is in a different place, and it is important to meet students where they are at.

A recurring theme of the dialogue sessions was the importance of Indigenous students having a clearly designated contact point with whom they can build a relationship, who can help them navigate the complexities of the University, and who can ensure that their individual needs are met. Many participants talked about the difficulty Indigenous students face in knowing what supports were available or how to access them. One participant said that the University assumes that students will ask for what they need, but students may not know what to ask for or who to ask. Students may also be understandably cautious about who they engage with and who they

trust, given the unbalanced power dynamic. University supports need to be proactive, including making personal check-ins in periods of high stress of students, such as exams.

Participants said that the University needs to know more about the factors leading to "student disappearance" – students who abruptly stop attending classes without explanation. More resources should be allocated to enable one-on-one follow up with students who have stopped attending classes, so that their needs can be addressed, and lessons can be learned. At the time of registration, students could be asked to provide consent to be contacted in the event there are any concerns about their well-being. This is related to being able to meet the mental health needs of Indigenous students, who may struggle and leave if supports are inadequate.

Direct, culturally aware, and respectful communication is essential for establishing and maintaining relationships with students. This includes transparency and follow through when students communicate their needs or struggles.

In a number of dialogue sessions, participants proposed the model of "Aunties." In Indigenous communities, Aunties look out for the younger ones and making sure they feel heard and cared for. The University could employ Aunties with a responsibility to advocate for younger, less experienced students and facilitate their access to supports and services. Aunties would need a trauma- and healing-informed understanding, as well as grounding in anti-Indigenous racism work. There could be a visual symbol to identify Aunties to other students as a safe person.

It was also noted that essential information about university life is often not presented in ways that are accessible to Indigenous students. There needs to be greater attention to providing clear, step-by-step instructions and to making better use of design and graphics, including Indigenous design. These "roadmaps" shouldn't be limited to webpages and pamphlets. They should be turned into signs and posters that are prominently displayed throughout the campus.

A strong theme throughout the discussions was the fundamental value of simply being able to meet and spend time with others from one's culture and community. One way to help build confidence is to bring Indigenous students together with others from similar backgrounds, in the classroom and outside the classroom. Having students working cooperatively on a team can help create a network that make students feel more comfortable and able to talk about their needs.

Extra-curricular activities are an opportunity for students to meet and associate casually. These activities allow Indigenous students from different areas to meet one another and build strong networks. Providing activities that resonate with the cultural background of Indigenous students is essential to addressing feelings of fear and anxiety.

Participants also noted that it would be valuable for there to be more activities that were family oriented. This would benefits students who are parents. It would also create an entry point to help Indigenous youth become more familiar and comfortable with the campus, beginning at a young age.

Participants emphasized the importance of cultural competency and cross-cultural communications skills for all faculty and staff. University staff have good intentions and want to

help students when they see them struggle. However, without cultural competency, these well-meaning efforts can do as much harm as good.

In one of the sessions, a student pointed out a lack of clarity about how to raise complaints about racist behaviour and actions, and the lack of support for students who want to come forward. They said that there should be policies and procedures in place to respond to acts of racism and other discriminatory behaviour comparable to how the University handles sexual assault or harassment.

Participants stated that some of the most difficult obstacles confronting students are the result of having to leave their home communities to attend post-secondary institutions in urban settings. These students have to learn the basic requirements of city life, such as taking the bus or where to buy groceries. The first priority for many Indigenous students is usually to secure basic needs and support (rent, utilities, transportation, childcare, laundry) rather than focusing on their studies. Student supports need to be holistic, orienting them not only to the campus, but also to the essentials of life in the city. Students need to be connected both with the services available on campus and with those offered through community organizations.

Participants emphasized the importance of life skills training. Specific areas raised in the discussion included financial literacy (budgeting, paying bills and tuition), time management, studying strategies, stress management, self-care, healthy relationships and personal safety.

Stresses experienced by Indigenous students can be particularly acute for individuals with mental health issues or for neurodivergent students. Access to wellness supports including stress management, should be available when Indigenous students are preparing for university, when they are on summer break, or when they are taking a leave from their studies. One participant noted the specific need for marriage or relationship counselling, noting that the stresses of university are hard on relationships. There should also be resources to help Indigenous students deal with experiences of violence, including lateral violence, and racism.

Participants noted that students with disabilities have distinct needs and the right to accommodation. Yet, for a wide range of reasons, they may be reluctant to seek these accommodations. Participants talked about the fact that some disabilities are invisible. One of the participants talked about the impacts of trauma, intergenerational trauma and addiction as mental health issues that continue to go largely unrecognized and unacknowledged. Many have had negative experiences throughout their lives associated with disclosing or drawing attention to their disability. One commented, "If you're with people who don't understand, then you won't share: you can't even describe how you need help."

All supports need to be provided in a culturally safe, trauma informed way. Participants also raised concerns about the criteria used to qualify for wellness supports and accommodations. There are numerous legitimate reasons why students may need accommodation, including dealing with a history of trauma and encountering racism and lack of culturally safe spaces. Doctors won't necessarily recognize or understand all the reasons why accommodation is needed, and students shouldn't be forced into having these conversations with physicians.

V. BUILDING GOOD RELATIONS BETWEEN THE UNIVERSITY AND INDIGENOUS GOVERNMENTS, ORGANIZATIONS AND COMMUNITIES

Participants talked about how better connections between the University and Indigenous communities and organizations would provide significant benefits for students. Family members and community organizations providing services and working with youth have a strong understanding of Indigenous student needs. These community members can help identify the supports that are needed, even when those students may be reluctant to ask for these supports themselves.

Collaboration with Indigenous communities and organizations is also a way to create new opportunities for students. Participants highlighted potential for experiential learning opportunities, collaborative research, community service projects and work placements. When Indigenous students have the opportunity to do work placements within their own community, this creates a win-win experience for all involved. It is a good opportunity for students to further their education and it can lead to positive impacts for the community. Furthermore, students who are given the opportunity to work in their own communities are more likely to return to the community when their studies are completed. Instead of resources being drained from communities, community capacity is enriched.

Participants said that in their experience Indigenous governments, organizations and communities often have only limited, and somewhat sporadic relationships with the University. Many don't know who's who at the University. Community organizations working with students don't know who to reach out to at the university and face their own challenges in navigating the University's complex structures. For example, organizations may refer students to counselling, accessibility services, bursaries, or awards, but don't have any direct contact with the people who work in these departments. A deeper relationship and more knowledge would help ensure that students do not fall through the cracks.

Regular meetings are crucial to maintain communication and build relationships It is also important that there is follow-through on the commitments made at such meetings. One specific suggestion made in a number of the original listening sessions was for the University to share a regularly updated list of available student supports or services and an up-to-date contact list for relevant staff and counsellors at the University. It was also recommended that the University maintain an up-to-date email list of key contacts at the community level. Because things change quickly at the community level, the accuracy of the list should be checked regularly.

Participants emphasized the value of reciprocity. Many Indigenous people perceive the University through a history of researchers taking from their communities and not giving back. Participants said that the University needs to adopt a community-centric approach that begins with asking Indigenous communities what they need and how they want to work. In one session, a participant compared doing research in good ways was compared to ceremony: relations and protocol are central. This understanding could be applied to other aspects of How the University engages with Indigenous peoples. Building relationships takes time and hard work. The

University must play a more active role in enabling and facilitating long-term relationships between its staff and Indigenous communities.

VI.   KEY STRATEGIES

There is a wealth of ideas and strategies shared throughout these sessions. For the purpose of this overview report, the following key strategies have been identified:

➢ Engage with Indigenous youth as early as possible, beginning at Grade 9 or sooner, and use a range of activities – in the community and on campus – to help them feel at home in the University environment, including meeting Indigenous people on faculty and staff, as well as Indigenous students and graduates.

➢ Reduce barriers to enrollment through micro-credentialing, less stringent entrance requirements, and other approaches enabling students to make progress toward a degree at their own pace, while minimizing their financial burden.

➢ Advocate for improved community infrastructure, including equitable access to affordable high-speed internet, to enable more Indigenous students to study remotely.

➢ Ensure that students who do study remotely have access to peer networks and all the supports available to students pursuing their degrees on campus.

➢ Invest in providing greater opportunity for in-person courses to be taught in Indigenous communities, including delivering course and conducting fieldwork in collaboration with Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers.

➢ Work with Elders and Knowledge Keepers to expand the respectful incorporation of Indigenous knowledge systems and ways of knowing in a much wider range of courses, faculties and programmes, including STEM.

➢ Ensure that Elders and Knowledge Keepers engaged in teaching are appropriately remunerated – including non-financial remuneration such as leave and learning supports – for being recognized experts in their communities and for the years of preparation and experience that is reflected when they share this knowledge.

➢ Make Indigenous culture and traditions visible throughout the University, not just in spaces specifically intended for Indigenous students.

➢ Make a conscious and consistent effort to acknowledge and reflect the diversity of Indigenous Nations and their citizens, including incorporating more Inuit specific content, and helping create spaces for Two Spirit students.

➢ Take a holistic approach to student orientation that includes essential information on how to adapt to living in the city and how to connect with local Indigenous community

organizations.

➢ Establish culturally safe contact points to help Indigenous students navigate all aspects of University life – the model of Indigenous Aunties was suggested in several sessions – and ensure that Indigenous students are aware of these contact points.

➢ Reach out to students who have withdrawn from classes or studies to help better understand the challenges they have faced and how these challenges could be better overcome.

➢ Ensure that Indigenous students can access culturally-safe health and wellness supports even when on study or summer break.

➢ Make detailed, up to date contact lists available to Indigenous peoples' organizations.

➢ Ensure that the principle of reciprocity is at the heart of all relations with Indigenous partners, including working together to identify community needs that can be addressed through University research and initiatives like co-op learning and work placements.

VII.   CONCLUSION

We are grateful to all those who generously shared their time and expertise. Over the 19 community dialogue sessions, there was a lot of positive energy and enthusiasm around the prospect of positive change within the University and in its relationships with Indigenous peoples. The perspectives that were shared helped better clarify the challenges facing Indigenous students and the strategies that can be used to support their success,

For the purposes of brevity, this report provides only an overview of those key themes that were highlighted in each session. Greater detail, reflective of the diversity of views and the depth of participant knowledge, can be found in the summary reports that have been prepared for each of the 19 community sessions that were held.