




Post-Pandemic Shift Project

SUMMARY REPORT



“Wahkotowin is present when we exhibit a welcoming atmosphere, when we reflect on the values that we are practicing in all our relationships and when we engage in compassionate dialogue with one another.”

Elder Louise Halfe

Our Purpose

As of the completion of this report, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented change upon us all. It continues to impact our day-to-day life and clearly will have a lasting impact on our future – as individuals, as institutions, and as a part of a global community.

While we don't know when the active phase of the pandemic will be behind us, we do know we have changed because of it. At USask, we have responded well to the immediate and mid-term changes precipitated by the pandemic. We've done so swiftly and effectively and with the needs of our students, faculty and staff at the forefront.

At the same time, we knew it was important to turn our thoughts and actions to a post-pandemic world. We've seen the world change around us; we knew we had to understand how that change had affected our campuses, and how best could we find, and provide, support. We knew, too, that we must genuinely engage with external stakeholders to understand how the pandemic has affected them and how we can best innovate to meet their needs – to be the university they need.

And, we knew the time to talk about the future was now, to help lead the way during this unique point in history. As one participant put it – *“I don't want to forget how I am feeling right now, at this time, in this place.”*

Our Approach

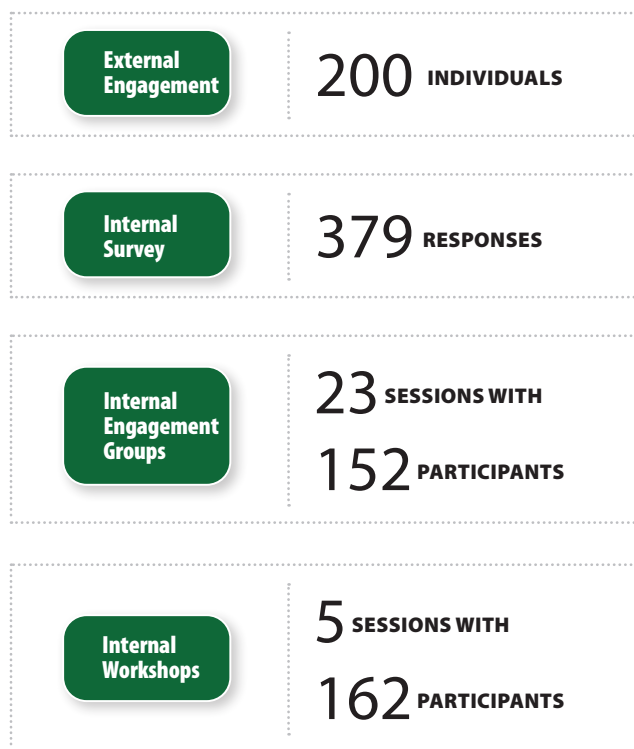
To address these questions, we created the Post-Pandemic Shift Project, an initiative designed to build a framework to guide decision-makers and provide a pathway that will inform and support a post-pandemic University of Saskatchewan.

Fundamental to the project was its grounding in the principles of **wahkotowin**, a Nêhiyaw (Cree) concept that teaches us that “everything is related,” that our shared kinship and interdependence will shape our future. Using that grounding, we set out to engage with various “circles of voices” both external and internal to our university with the goal of linking the genuine voice of our broader community with the critical thinking, pedagogic expertise, and informed experience of the USask academic community.

Externally, we engaged with organizational stakeholders with close ties to USask across multiple sectors (e.g., Industry, Education, Indigenous, Alumni, Community, and Government). We sought to understand how the phenomenon of the pandemic affected *their* lives, how they were personally and professionally experiencing the pandemic and what they thought was on the other side.

Internally, we used what we learned externally and designed a multi-layered process to connect broadly and deeply. Through surveys, stakeholder engagement groups, and thematic workshops, we ended up with almost 900 points of contact throughout the process.

Engagement by the Numbers



Our Community

The overall project was led by Vice-President, University Relations, Debra Pozega Osburn, and supported by Senior Strategist, Office of the President, Julian Demkiw.

Designing and implementing the internal engagement was a commission of campus stakeholders led by Commission Co-Chairs, Candace Wasacase-Lafferty and Vince Bruni-Bossio.

The commission:

Angela Bedard-Haughn	Kiefer Roberts
Vince Bruni-Bossio	Vicki Squires
Sarah Buhler	Nancy Turner
Pamela Downe	Candace Wasacase-Lafferty
Marcy Hildebrand	Candice Weingartner
Don Leidl	

These commissioners – students, faculty, staff, and senior leaders – dedicated their time to design engagement processes, lead workshops, and provide feedback on what we collectively heard.

Our Findings

From our discussions grew a richness of findings and learnings – too many to put into a single, digestible report. We found that in sharing our stories, we were building a collective experience, a community of knowledge and understanding about the pandemic and what we saw as shift in our community resulting from our experiences.

In search of the “shift” in the Post-Pandemic Shift Project, we found the compelling realities of people. Each day, we heard stories that cannot be unheard. Learning from this experience and applying these new realities into our community will shift our ways of being, knowing and doing. In the years to come, we will be a community that recognizes our interdependence and embraces our shared purpose. Throughout the pandemic, USask has been an adaptable, innovative leader in post-secondary education, with a stated commitment to being the university the world needs.

It was not the purpose of the project to create a plan or direct outcomes for the institution; rather, the project was designed to reflect back what we heard and to create a framework to guide decision-makers in a post-pandemic reality. The framework that follows was developed from the voices of our stakeholders and will provide us with a lens through which to view the decisions we will need to make to best be the university they need in our post-pandemic world.

What we found can be summarized by four fundamental shifts:

A SHIFT IN HOW WE INNOVATE. We heard that our community appreciated an interest and willingness to experiment with change and try new things, even when we don’t know exactly where we are going to end up – as long as we are careful to listen to the voices of those most affected by the change.

A SHIFT IN HOW WE ENGAGE. We discovered that many felt a heightened sense of connection to one another during this time. There was a recognized interdependence between us; that a decision in one part of the community can have great impacts in another, seemingly disconnected, part. Engagement, moving forward must be more thoughtful, more reflective and, in particular, ensuring that issues of equity within our community are front and centre in all decisions we make.

A SHIFT IN HOW WE SUPPORT. We learned that our support strategies and efforts are not mutually exclusive; that health and wellness, IT support, teaching and learning resources are all connected and need to account for one another. One comment in particular drives this shift: *“I have never felt more supported by the university as during this pandemic. I hope that does not go away.”*

A SHIFT IN HOW WE LEAD. Lastly, we saw that our leaders were more adaptable than ever and through the changes that occurred, they were able to connect with stakeholders more than ever, despite physical constraints. Our community appreciated these efforts and wanted to see these leadership practices continued in a post-pandemic world.

A SHIFT IN HOW WE...

INNOVATE

EXPERIMENTATION

The pandemic has shown that we are willing and able to try new things when we don't have all the information and don't know the outcomes.

There will be increased expectations from the USask community and beyond for all of us to be open to trying new ideas about our work, about our classrooms, and how we operate.

Practical Questions for Action:

How am I investigating new ideas and ways of doing things?

Am I creating an environment where others feel comfortable to fail?

Even though we do not have all the information, can we try this idea out?



FEEDBACK

Coupled with experimentation and "trying things" is the need to ensure robust systems of continuous evaluation are developed.

When trying new things, decision makers must be purposeful about who they seek feedback from, how often, and in what formats. We must be prepared to go above and beyond to ensure the right voices are heard.

Practical Questions for Action:

Am I clear on who I am soliciting feedback from, how, and when?

Have I made it easy for feedback to be given?

Do I know how feedback will be incorporated into my decision making process?



WHAT WE HEARD FROM OUR COMMUNITY...

We have had to step outside of our comfort zone; everyone has had to learn new things. I hope we keep that.

Meeting people where they are means that we as an institution need to be better at listening. Clearly, an ideal world is one where we take the time to truly listen.

People are going to be emboldened. We are going to be confronted by our stakeholders about our thinking and our processes.

Can we change fast? Sure we can. We showed the world we could.



WHAT WE HEARD FROM OUR RESEARCH...

A complete return to what has long been considered “normal” would represent a failure for our campuses and our broader society.

University Affairs, July 2021

The pandemic has changed us. Our collective mindset has shifted toward being open and receptive to new opportunities and limitless possibilities.

Forbes, July 2021

Now that people are once again gathering and mingling the jet fuel of creativity this next decade is a prime time for creativity to flourish.

RBC, July 2021

Rapid responses to crises or societal changes can be slowed by ponderous program approval processes and the rigid mechanics of funding regimes. PSE institutions have managed to find some workarounds that have enabled rapid innovation at the edge, but these workarounds are not sustainable over the long term and need to be integrated into mainstream funding and credentialing systems to persist and spread.

Public Policy Forum, June 2021

Historically there has been a widely held belief, or “orthodoxy,” that companies cannot innovate in a remote work environment. The past 15 months have shown us that notion is untrue.

Deloitte, Aug. 2021

A SHIFT IN HOW WE...

ENGAGE

INTERDEPENDENCY

More so than ever, the pandemic taught us that we are all in this together; how a decision on one side of the planet had a direct impact in our personal lives. With this increased recognition comes an increased expectation for decisions to be made in an integrated fashion, ensuring that those most impacted by the decision are involved in its outcome.

Practical Questions for Action:

How have I considered the full impact of my decisions on key stakeholders and colleagues?

Have I taken the time to consider any potential unintended consequences of decisions?



EQUITY

The pandemic exposed and exacerbated the inequity inherent in society and within our own institution. Additionally, we heard that the “push to work and learn remotely” allowed many a more equitable playing field at USask.

How can we keep the equity gains made during the pandemic and shore up revealed gaps in our supports in the post-pandemic world?

Practical Questions for Action:

How am I ensuring that minority voices are heard?

How am I ensuring that supports are provided for minority concerns?

Where does accessibility factor into my decision-making priorities?



WHAT WE HEARD FROM OUR COMMUNITY...

Whether you think of it as compassion, empathy, or just plain understanding that everyone is different, the pandemic has shone a bright light on the benefits of walking the talk when it comes to appreciating both the essential contributions and the varying needs of employees.

I hope that post-pandemic, we proceed with more compassion for our students, faculty, and staff. The flexibility and understanding we require from each other during the pandemic isn't a new need - it is simply more exposed now that we're all feeling it at the same time . . . How can we ensure that compassion and mutual respect/responsibility drive our work going forward?

The idea of citizenship will resurface. I hope at the end of this we have a different sense on how we take care of others.

Connectivity is a human right. Anytime, Anywhere.



WHAT WE HEARD FROM OUR RESEARCH...

Interdependence has an important conceptual effect: it invalidates silo thinking. Since conflation and systemic connectivity are what ultimately matter, addressing a problem or assessing an issue or risk in isolation from others is senseless and futile.

COVID-19: The Great Reset, 2021

Covid-19 has aimed a greater spotlight on social justice issues, in Canada and around the world. It has become evident that, at the same time as they face financial challenges and disruption in their own institutions, universities need to be leaders in increasing equity.

Universities Canada, 2020

As COVID-19 spreads across the country it continues to disproportionately impact the most vulnerable and marginalized employees. This puts pressure on companies to improve working conditions and adapt to unique needs.

Brookefield Institute, "Yesterday's Gone", Feb. 2021

Covid-19 has exacerbated inequalities that were already in our sights and has illuminated more strongly the interdependencies of many of our social, cultural and economic structures.

Times Higher Education, July 2021

Wahkotowin teaches us that, "everything is related" and that our shared kinship, our interdependence will shape our future.

Louise Halfe, Elder and Parliamentary Poet Laureate

A SHIFT IN HOW WE...

SUPPORT

Faculty told us they were willing to change. Students told us they were willing to consider new ways of learning. Staff told us they were excited at the opportunity to try things differently. A common thread among all stakeholders was that they just need support to do it. They need support to adapt to new technologies and new ways of teaching and learning. They need support to handle the demands and stresses of change in their lives. They need to know that someone has their back.

INTEGRATED

It is not uncommon for the units we lead to have detailed plans for support in areas such as information technology, health and wellness, and human resources. The pandemic has shown us, though, that our support strategies need to be front and centre and that it must be clear how each one connects with the other.

In particular, it is recognized that special attention must be given to providing supports for managing and leading change itself.

Practical Questions for Action:

Have I asked all those involved what supports they need?

Have I considered how supports connect and interact with each other?



MUTUAL RESPONSIBILITY

Times of transition require a clear investment in support that is ongoing, agile, and provided by well-trained staff. It is an institutional responsibility to help community members navigate in this new world.

Conversely, the community has a responsibility to avail itself of the supports necessary and to communicate those needs to ensure they are met.

Practical Questions for Action:

Have I asked for all the supports I need?

Am I making use of all supports offered?

How much time do I spend ensuring my team has the tools they need to do the work?

“ I never felt more supported by the university as during this pandemic. I hope that doesn't go away.

As a unit leader, do I have explicit plans and actions to provide supports in...

TECHNOLOGY

HEALTH & WELLNESS

CHANGE MANAGEMENT



WHAT WE HEARD FROM OUR RESEARCH...

As hybrid work models become more entrenched, technology will be mission-critical to every HR strategy.

RBC, 2021

When you think about “innovation,” what business function comes to mind? Probably product development. Post-pandemic, it'll likely be HR.

Forbes, 2021

Institutions will examine closely whether they're making the most out of their physical spaces and face-to-face time. “We're going to go into every room and we're going to say, ‘Is meaningful connection going to happen in this space?’”

Chronicle of Higher Education, 2021

A **SHIFT** IN HOW WE...

LEAD

ADAPTABLE

We have shown an incredible ability to be flexible during the pandemic. We have learned as a community that we can be adaptable in our policies and procedures as long as we continue to stay true to our values and principles. There will be an expectation from our stakeholders to show flexibility in many of our decision-making processes.

Practical Questions for Action:

What have I done to change my thinking and approach in new ways around a decision?

What traditional approaches do I need to adhere to and which ones can/should be challenged in a post-pandemic world?



INCLUSIVE

Although many of us were physically separated during the pandemic, extraordinary efforts were made to connect one another and connect everyone as much as possible.

We will need to ensure these inclusive decision-making practices are carried over to the post-pandemic world.

Practical Questions for Action:

Who has been included in the decision-making process?

Am I including the voices around the table that are most affected by this decision?

Have I chosen to include my own voice when asked?



WHAT WE HEARD FROM OUR COMMUNITY...

Leadership in a post-pandemic world will be less bureaucratic, more reflective; it will genuinely allow people to lead from wherever they are in their organization or their community.

I really appreciate how much trust the U of S has in employees by giving us the ability to work from home and carry on with that.

I've appreciated how much easier it is to access decision-makers and feel part of the process – I hope we keep that.

We have all become more adaptable and flexible and developed these 'muscles' for moving forward. With the scope and magnitude of change that is coming, we'll need these muscles for sure. We need to keep pressing ourselves so we don't lose these skills.

There's still an element of the old command-and-control in a lot of organizations, and now that's just not going to work.



WHAT WE HEARD FROM OUR RESEARCH...

A successful postpandemic university will be one that sees this moment for what it is: a time to seize technological advances to build on centuries of expertise; to use these technologies as a tool to break down barriers to access; and to understand how these challenges are connected.

Globe and Mail, July 2021

One of the most important takeaways from the pandemic is that it has served as a catalyst for cultural transformation. For example, companies have witnessed an increase in trust, a flattening of hierarchies, and more rapid and agile decision-making.

Cornell Chronicle, March 2021

During the pandemic a new style of leadership emerged, and new leaders emerged. The traditional structures got blown apart. As we prepare to return in person on campuses this fall, we have a unique opportunity to reimagine our universities as more inclusive, more flexible and ultimately more intellectually productive learning commons. Some of the ways in which we were organized pre-pandemic, and some of what we did as teachers and researchers still make sense, but some don't. Whatever we are preparing for, it isn't fall 2019. This will be different.

University Affairs, July 5, 2021



UNIVERSITY OF
SASKATCHEWAN

The Post-Pandemic Shift Project has given us access to viewpoints, ideas, and pathways that will help us change our ways of being, knowing, and doing. Clearly, in the years ahead, we as a community will recognize our interdependence. We will embrace our shared purpose. We will adapt. We will try new things. And we'll write the next chapter in our shared story.

How? What is provided here is a reflection of the voices of our community at a critical moment in our history. There is no prescription, no manual for how this work is to be used but it is important that the voices reflected here are heard and accounted for as each of us contemplate what it means to live in a post-pandemic world. Just as each of us has been affected differently by the pandemic, each of us will bring what we have learned into play in our own unique, purposeful way. We'll combine the learnings of the community with our own individual experiences to create practices and outcomes that will have a remarkable impact for generations to come. We'll learn, and we'll shift. In a post-pandemic world, that will make all the difference.

Debra Pozega Osburn, Vice-President University Relations