**Enhancing Social Innovation @ USask**

**Context**

Across the country, conversations are happening about how society expects more from publicly funded institutions in solving complex societal challenges and about how universities can have greater social impact. In the recent report by Universities Canada (2020), key challenges that need to be overcome to strengthen universities and communities and build prosperity were a key focus.[[1]](#footnote-1) It is time for the University of Saskatchewan (USask) to tackle these challenges head on.

USask has set an ambitious vision in its University Plan 2025, charting a course to become “The University the World Needs.” To achieve this, USask needs to support a new generation of scholars eager to work alongside communities and pursue publicly engaged scholarship. Together, we can fortify publicly engaged scholarship to “Be the University the World Needs.”

**Purpose**

**The Office of the Vice-President Research is embarking on consultations to develop a coherent strategy for enhanced social innovation that will build on existing strengths in publicly engaged scholarship and explore new strategic pathways for greater social impact.**

We will develop a set of strategies to enable us to leap forward in putting our collective knowledge to work for the benefit of society. We recognize the need to overcome institutional barriers and seize opportunities to engage more fully with communities. We also recognize that our university, together with many other institutions and organizations, faces a time of financial austerity (particularly in the face of a pandemic), when social needs are greater than ever.

We will engage in the process of listening to and learning with communities to develop ways of seizing opportunities and overcoming barriers to achieve more significant social impact. We believe our commitments can be achieved by working hand-in-hand with our communities, creatively building upon our collective knowledge, experiences, and strengths.

**Definition of Social Innovation**

The term “social innovation” describes the process of putting our knowledges to work to have social impact. Social innovation has many definitions, butat its core it supports the creation of more effective solutions to entrenched social problems that span many areas of life. Key features of social innovation include[[2]](#footnote-2):

* motivated by the goal of meeting a social need;
* focused on solutions that lead to a positive social change;
* focused on more just and equitable solutions compared to existing ones;
* focused on benefits for society instead of individuals or organizations;
* targeted to “bottom-up” transformation of the functioning of social systems; and
* distinctive both in terms of relationships (new forms of cooperation and collaboration) and outcomes (good for society and enhance society’s capacity to act).

**Guiding Principles**

The principles that will guide development of an institutional social innovation strategy, focusing on social innovation as it relates to research, scholarly and artistic efforts, include:

* Acknowledge that there are diverse knowledges.
* Place value on lived experience.
* Take a strengths-based approach.
* Let the champions lead.
* Promote equity, diversity, inclusion.
* Seek reconciliation.

**Proposed Strategies**

“Discovery the World Needs”, the USask strategic research plan, identified several strategies to achieve a more significant social impact. While these strategies were organized through an institutional lens, they will be realized and actualized by each faculty member, student, and staff member of this institution and the communities we serve. A robust consultation process is needed to consider the following strategies and identify priority actions we must undertake to achieve compelling social impact.

1. SHARE AND CELEBRATE SUCCESS STORIES OF WORK WITH OUR COMMUNITIES
   * Discover, learn from and celebrate the strengths of communities.
   * Promote and reward publicly engaged scholarship.
   * Develop programs and services to effectively translate publicly engaged scholarship into solutions that benefit society.
   * Engage in the power of narratives, telling our stories to alumni, community, government and industry stakeholders.
2. BUILD OUR CAPACITY IN SOCIAL INNOVATION
   * Align policies to ensure that those engaged in social innovation don’t encounter institutional barriers.
   * Establish leadership capacity, including prioritizing research chairs in social innovation and a building a peer support group that will provide mentorship on social innovation.
   * Review and revise tenure, promotion, and reward structures to reward publicly engaged community research.
3. UNLOCK THE POTENTIAL OF SOCIAL INNOVATION
   * Create a community-of-practice that promotes activities enhancing social innovation and incentivizing work with communities to address social needs with just and equitable outcomes.
   * Optimize the use of university assets, particularly those with a research and discovery mandate.
   * Create coordinating mechanisms among the distributed community-engagement activities (e.g., journals, collaboratives, clusters, and centers) and ensure the sustainability of existing high performing ones.
4. PUT OUR JOINT KNOWLEDGE TO WORK
   * Improve accessibility of the university to communities and vice-versa (e.g., a centralized portal).
   * Pilot new approaches to social innovation, where we co-create ideas and co-produce solution.
   * Leverage existing networks, platforms and partnerships to influence policy makers to affect social change.

**Next Steps**This fall, we will launch a consultation process where we will:

* Engage with the campus community and external communities to create an action plan. Using diverse approaches will be used to consult, including interviews, focus groups, and working groups to facilitate conversations and develop detailed implementation strategies.   
  (**suggested timeline:** now to December)
* Amalgamate feedback and develop the action plan that bridges strategies to reality.  
  (**suggested timeline:** January to February)
* Engage with the campus community and external communities to refine the action plan.  
  (**suggested timeline:** March)
* Work with university and community leaders and others to acknowledge there are many with a role to play in the task and its success.   
  (**suggested timeline:** April)

## Appendix 1

## Brief History of USask Community Connection

## Our connection to community has been at the foundation of our vision and mission for over a century, and has undergone fundamental changes over time, with each connection progressive for its time.

**The first generation (1907-1960) was “public service”.** As the 20th century opened, there were immense societal changes, with many newcomers to the region. Thanks to massive immigration from beyond Canada’s borders, the Saskatchewan population grew from about 10,000 in 1901 to nearly 500,000 in 1911. USask (founded in 1907) was there to assist with these changes.

The USask Extension Department was developed in 1910, offering public service extension programs offered classes to local residents interested in learning new skills or applying new skills to Saskatchewan's unique soils and terrain. Until the 1930s, faculty were expected to engage in extension work. For example, funded through the Agricultural Instruction Act, equipped by both the government and the university, and staffed by the university, the Better Farming Train toured the province from 1914 to 1922, providing lectures and demonstrations on agricultural matters. By 1922, 25 per cent of the province's population had accessed the train’s programming. By 1927, a smaller version of the train toured the province, and USask extension activities continued but were primarily the responsibility of the Extension Division, with the College of Agriculture faculty continuing to engage in its own extension activities. USask scholars contributed to establishing the Saskatoon symphony orchestra in 1932 and the Saskatchewan archives in 1945.

**The second generation (1960-1990) was “socially responsible scholarship.”** The profound changes after WWII resulted in the U.N. University Declaration of Human Rights (1948) setting in motion a global movement for [human rights](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_right) and freedoms. This period marked a growing public frustration with what was seen to be the unresponsiveness of universities—the "Ivory Tower", and the perception that universities were not well organized to bring to bear intellectual resources on local problems in a co-ordinated way. There was also a growing recognition that universities and their scholarly activities should address the needs of societies in which they operate.

At USask, scholars started to advocate for socially responsible scholarship. In 1984, the Canadian Centre for the Study of Co-operatives (CCSC) was established, supported financially by major co-operatives and credit unions from across Canada. The goal of the CCSC was to create a nexus with society and provide policymakers and practitioners with information and tools to develop co-operatives as solutions to the complex social/economic challenges facing communities worldwide.

**The third generation (1990-2020) was “engaged scholarship,”** The world witnessed an explosion of information, made possible by mainstreaming the computer and the Internet. This information explosion brought greater awareness of the state of the world. Following the U.N. Millennium Summit in 2000, the U.N. adopted the U.N. Millennium Declaration, with eight millennium development goals (MDGs) for the year 2015. Fifteen years later, the MDGs were replaced by the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) for the year 2030.

At USask we had much to celebrate, as efforts to integrate engaged scholarship into the university were successful in many ways. In 2000, when USask established the Community University Institute for Social Research (CUISR) research centre, there was an upsurge in community-engaged research across a wide range of academic disciplines. In 2003, USask and CUISR hosted the first CUExpo, welcoming 500 attendees to discuss how to build the capacity of universities and communities to foster research and contribute to policy and practice for the benefit of society. By 2010, the SSHRC Community-University Research Alliance (CURA) funded Social Economy Project, titled “*Linking, Learning, Leveraging: Social Enterprises, Knowledgeable Economies, and Sustainable Communities*,” was led by the Canadian Cooperative Association in consultation with its partners, including USask’s CUISR, as well as an international network of scholars. At the time, it was the largest SSHRC grant ever received by USask.

A systematic expansion of USask institutional support of engaged scholars followed. For example:

* In 2011, the university established funds for a new Community Outreach & Aboriginal Engagement Office overseen by a cross-portfolio executive committee and Special Advisor, Aboriginal Indigenous initiatives.
* In 2012, the university opened the Community Outreach & Engagement Office at Station 20 West in Saskatoon, which was also known as the Community Research & Engagement Office (CREO). The change in name reflected the change in institutional responsibility for this office, which shifted between university portfolios over the years, a possible reflection of the divergent view of the intended nature of the community-university relationship (i.e., outreach/extension vs. research/immersion).
* In 2014, the university established the *Engaged Scholar Journal* (ESJ)—the first Canadian online journal on engaged scholarship—that continues to serve as a forum for constructive dialogue on the both the meanings and applications of engaged scholarship.
* In 2017, the Office of the Vice-Provost Indigenous Engagement (OVPIE) which focused on Indigenization and reconciliation was opened.
* USask participated in the work of national organizations, including Research Impact Canada (a group that fosters knowledge mobilization), Community Campus Engage Canada, and Community Based Research Canada. These pan-Canadian organizations share the vision of putting knowledge to work to make communities more sustainable and prosperous.

USask champions of engaged scholarship included about a dozen exemplary scholars who populated the CUISR Board and the Engaged Scholar Journal Board, although there were *many* others participating in engaged scholarship.

Evidence of USask’s social impact is our top 100 performance in the internationally recognized *Times Higher Education Impact Rankings*, measured against the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals and released in April of 2020. It is now time to aim higher to be the university the world needs.

**The next generation (2020-2050) is “publicly engaged scholarship”.** In the year that the U.N. celebrates its 75th anniversary, we face unprecedented social challenges. We are amidst a climate crisis, a pandemic, and the rise of social movements that seek to ensure the rights and freedom for all. Universities owe it to their societies to play a central role in confronting these social challenges by supporting publicly engaged scholars—those who demonstrate excellence in their academic scholarship and have the mindset and skillset to use their expertise, through a convergence of disciplines and purposeful collaborations, to create knowledge that influences and improves the lives of people beyond the academy.

USask’s OVPR commits to creating a social innovation strategy built on a foundation of publicly engaged scholarship. We have exceptional faculty who are deeply committed to and engaged in these efforts, we have world-leading centers and institutes that are mobilizing knowledges to address issues impacting society, and we have strong relationships, collaborations and partnerships with communities, locally, nationally and internationally. Together, we can fortify publicly engaged scholarship in order to “Be the University the World Needs.”

1. Universities Canada. 2020. Strengthening campuses and communities to build a prosperous Canada: Regional perspectives on the social impact of Canadian universities. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. McConnell Foundation. (n.d.). *Social Innovation*. Retrieved from McConnell Foundation: https://mcconnellfoundation.ca/social-innovation-2/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)