Limited funds to meet huge demands for First Nations students

Written by Manfred Joehnck
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First Nations University of Canada. Photo courtesy of Manfred Joehnck.
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The vice president of academics at the First Nations University of Canada, Lynn Wells, is encouraged by the remarkable growth in the number of Aboriginal students taking classes at the province’s three universities, but she is also worried about those waiting to have their funding approved.

Figures obtained by the federal NDP indicate access to a federal program for First Nations students to attend university has dropped by nearly 20% since 1997.

The NDP blames that on a 2% funding cap that has not kept up with inflation and the growing demand. The NDP says the Liberals promised to do away with the cap in its first budget, but that did not happen.

Dr. Lynn Wells shares the concerns. She says there is obviously an immediate need that is not being met, and she wants action now.

"As quickly as possible, the positive impact of lifting that funding cap is indisputable," she said. "We all know it has to happen, it's just a matter on when that is going to happen -- the sooner the better."

Enrollment is up 7% at FNU this year. The University of Saskatchewan reports an increase of 8.4% for Aboriginal students, while the U of R won’t have its final numbers until next month, however all three institutions report Aboriginal enrollment is up more than 60% since 2010.

Aboriginal students now make up more than 10% of the student population at both the University of Regina and the University of Saskatchewan.

At First Nations University, enrollment is more than 900 students this year, over twice what it was in 2010.