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## NEWS RELEASE

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Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market  
Development

### **ABORIGINAL GATHERING PLACE OPENS AT UNBC**

PRINCE GEORGE – Aboriginal students at the University of Northern British Columbia now have more support to help them succeed at their post-secondary education with today’s opening of a new gathering place, announced Shirley Bond, MLA for Prince George-Valemount, and Pat Bell, MLA for Prince George-Mackenzie.

The UNBC Gathering Place or Lhuhuhwhezdel has a fully equipped kitchen, is finished with various types of wood, and houses a unique ventilation system designed to exhaust all smoke during traditional smudging ceremonies. The facility will be used by the UNBC First Nations Centre, faculty, staff and the community.

Lhuhuhwhezdel means “Gathering Place” in the Lheidli dialect of the Dakelh language (Carrier First Nations).

“Gathering places are an important part of the quality of life for Aboriginal students,” said Bond. “When we can help improve that quality of life, it enriches their university experience, and their success in post-secondary education helps create a stronger B.C. for everyone.”

The Province invested \$600,000 in the new gathering place, which will provide opportunities for ceremonial and cultural events as well as conferences and workshops for local First Nations and Aboriginal people from across the North. Housed within the Geoffrey R. Weller Library building, the gathering place has two classrooms and an event space for cultural events, sharing of oral traditions, art and material displays, language revitalization and circle teachings.

“Education is the silver bullet in creating a prosperous, tolerant and inclusive community,” said Bell. “Our government’s funding of this gathering place for Aboriginal students ensures that those students have the support and environment they need to succeed at UNBC.”

UNBC offers a number of programs designed to provide support for Aboriginal students through its First Nations Centre, including the Northern Advancement Program, Peer Support Network and First Nations Counselling Services. The Northern Advancement Program is a first-year transition studies program that helps Aboriginal and rural (including non-Aboriginal) students transition and successfully complete university.

“Lhuhuhwhezdel is a terrific reflection of a goal in our new University Plan to encourage a respectful, supportive, and friendly environment at UNBC,” said George Iwama, president of UNBC. “Thank you to the government of B.C., our own staff and faculty, and local elders who have helped to make this new centre a reality.”

Aboriginal gathering places are designed to decrease isolation and enhance support for Aboriginal students by building structures that reflect Aboriginal culture and history. UNBC’s gathering place is one of 27 being created at public post-secondary institutions across the province through a \$13.6-million investment by the Province.

Improving quality and choice in education is a key pillar of the Province’s Pacific Leadership Agenda. The gathering places funding also supports the government’s commitments, through the Transformative Change Accord and the Métis Nation Relationship Accord, to close the gaps in education, health, housing and economic opportunities.

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