

# After Red Deer Polytechnic: Beginner's Guide to Applying to Graduate School





## **Congratulations on all you've accomplished at Red Deer Polytechnic!**

Whether you're studying Arts, Psychology, Biology, or Nursing, you're already building the skills and curiosity needed to succeed in graduate studies. This booklet is here to support you as you consider, plan, and apply to master's programs in Canada and beyond. Grad school might feel like a big leap, but your undergrad has prepared you, and you don't have to do it alone.

Let's get started!

**Note:** Please use this document with caution! It does not intend to replace best practices for applying to graduate programs from specific institutions. This document is for information only.

# Getting Started on Your Grad School Journey

## When Should I Start Planning?

It's best to begin planning 12 to 24 months before you want to start grad school. This gives you time to research programs, connect with potential supervisors, find your references, gather documents, apply for funding, and be aware of deadlines.

## What Do I Need to Apply?

Most programs will ask for:

- A statement of intent or purpose[1]
- Your resume or CV[2]
- Two or three letters of reference[3]
- Transcripts from all post-secondary schools you attended
- Writing sample(s)
- Language test scores (if required)
- Application fee (varies by school)

**\*Be sure to review governing bodies' requirements, such as CAP, to ensure you meet requirements.**

## Reaching Out to Supervisors

If you're applying to a thesis-based program, you usually need to express interest in a supervisor or even find a supervisor ahead of time. Send a short, respectful email introducing yourself and your research interests. Attach your resume and transcript. Ask if they're accepting new students. Include a brief paragraph about why their research aligns with your goals.

## How Do I Find the Right Program?

Ask yourself:

- What do I want to study more deeply?
- Do I want to focus on research or professional development?
- Do I need to study in-person, online, or hybrid?
- What kind of career do I want after grad school?
- Do I want to pursue a course-based or thesis based masters?

Look at universities that offer your area of interest. Use keywords and browse university websites. Talk to your undergrad instructors—they often have great insight and connections.

You can also use tools like UniversityStudy.ca,[4] EduCanada[5], or program finders on major university websites. Many schools offer information sessions or virtual open houses—these are great opportunities to connect and ask questions.

[1] [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qAR3x-dOnm0&ab\\_channel=ProfessorLacePadilla](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qAR3x-dOnm0&ab_channel=ProfessorLacePadilla)

[2] <https://rdpolytech.ca/news/career-education-and-experience-development-ceed-centre-launches-myexperience>

[3] [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M7yY6miSZ64&ab\\_channel=ProfessorLacePadilla](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M7yY6miSZ64&ab_channel=ProfessorLacePadilla)

[4] <https://universitystudy.ca/>

[5] <https://www.educanada.ca/index.aspx?lang=eng>

## Course-Based vs. Thesis-Based Programs

### Thesis-Based/Research-Based Master's

- Involves original research
- Usually includes a supervisor and a research project
- May lead to a PhD
- Ideal if you enjoy deep dives and academic writing
- Often requires writing and defending a thesis/defense

### Course-Based/Professional-Based Master's

- Structured around classes and projects
- Often shorter in length (12–24 months)
- May include a practicum or capstone
- Ideal for career-focused paths
- Generally, more structured and quicker to complete

### Both are valuable!

If you're unsure which to choose, think about your goals after graduation. RDP grads in BA Psychology, BSc Biology, or BSc Nursing may consider thesis-based programs that align with their career goals or higher education goals. BSc Nursing grads can also pursue course-based/ professional-based programs like Nurse Practitioner studies. Students in humanities (BA) may consider both types depending on their interests in research, public policy, education, or social work.

**Need assistance? Check out [findamasters.com](https://www.findamasters.com)**



# Funding Your Future

## Federal Grants and Scholarships

- **Canada Graduate Scholarships (CGS-M):** Apply through the Tri-Council agencies (CIHR, NSERC, SSHRC). Deadline usually in December.
- **SSHRC:** For humanities and social sciences
- **NSERC:** For natural sciences and engineering
- **CIHR:** For health-related fields

These are highly competitive but prestigious. Students must apply through the institution where they intend to study.

## Institutional and Other Supports

- Many universities offer entrance and departmental scholarships
- Look for RA (Research Assistant) or TA (Teaching Assistant) positions
- Indigenous and equity-based scholarships are available through community and university sources
- External databases like ScholarshipsCanada, Yconic, and Indspire can help you find niche funding

## Provincial Supports (Alberta)

- **Alberta Graduate Excellence Scholarship (AGES):** Nominated by your institution, based on academic achievement.
- **Alberta Student Aid:** Offers student loans, grants, and other support for graduate-level study



## TIP:

**Apply for funding early, even before you're accepted. Some deadlines fall before program admissions decisions.**

**Note: Some applications may require you to be accepted into a Masters program to receive funding**

# Navigating the Application Process

## Key Application Steps:

1. Create a list of programs you're interested in.
2. Write or revise your statement of intent, which is unique for each school. Make it clear, specific, and passionate.
3. Update your resume/CV. Focus on academic, work, and volunteer experiences.
4. Request letters of reference. Choose professors, supervisors, or mentors who know your strengths.
5. Prepare your transcripts. Order them early.
6. Track deadlines. Use a calendar, spreadsheet, or planner.
7. Submit your applications and follow up on confirmations.

## Get Help Along the Way

- RDP Career Services can help with your resume and statement.
- Ask faculty from areas you are applying for feedback on your applications and connect with them for mentorship.
- Attend university information sessions (in-person or virtual).
- Reach out to potential supervisors or current graduate students if possible.



## Transcripts

RDP will **not** print or send official transcripts to your desired university. Rather you will access your transcript through **Mycreds**. Mycreds houses all your important academic documents.

To access Mycreds, you will first request RDP to upload your documentation. Simply log into your MyRDP, select the tile titled “Academic Quick Links,” select Mycreds, and complete the request form. Allow RDP 14 days to upload your documents.

Within your MyCreds account, you will be able to email your documents to the institution you are applying to! Note: Fees are applicable for this service



For assistance with  
MyCreds, contact  
[registrars@rdpolytech.ca](mailto:registrars@rdpolytech.ca)

MyCreds.ca

# Supplemental Exams

Some programs may require you to take supplemental exams, such as:

Casper



IELTS



SAT



ACT



MCAT



LSAT



GMAT



GRE



**Be sure to confirm if  
any additional  
entrance exams are  
required**

# Writing A Personal Statement

## Ask Yourself:

- What are your research intentions? Is it a project or a thesis?
- Why is this institution/instructor/program the best fit for you?
- Why should you be selected to join the program?
- What do you or will you contribute to the program?
- What extra activities have prepared you?
- Are there any special circumstances? What are you doing to remedy or make up for pitfalls?
- How are you funding your academic journey? Have you received any scholarships or awards?
- Can I work well with my instructor and other students?

## Other Considerations:

- Be sure to reread and ensure there are no spelling or grammatical errors.
- Ensure all information and claims are accurate.
- If citations are used, ensure they are done correctly.
- Confirm your document meets specific formatting requirements.
- Read and understand the ask of your institution's specific personal statement. If you do not understand the question, reach out to the corresponding department for clarification.
- Is the use of AI allowed? And if it is, how to cite properly.



**Learn more about writing personal statements:**



**Personal statements are unique to you and the institution you are applying to!**

# What If I Don't Get In?

## “No” Doesn't Mean “Never”

It's okay to be disappointed—many students don't get accepted on their first try. That doesn't mean you don't belong in grad school.

### Common Reasons for Rejection

- GPA doesn't meet the minimum requirements
- Weak or generic statement of intent
- Limited research or volunteer experience
- Local political or academic environment
- Poor fit with the program or supervisor
- Limited seats in programs
- Other reasons beyond your control

### What You Can Do

- Take additional courses to boost your GPA or improve your writing skills
- Get relevant research, work, or volunteer experience in your field
- Revise your personal statement with feedback from instructors
- Consider alternate programs or universities
- Apply again next year—many students do!

***Growth isn't always linear. Rejection can be part of the process.***

You are more than your application. Your path might take a few twists, but it's still valid and worthwhile.

# Graduate Studies Resource for Indigenous Students in Alberta

This section is designed to support First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students who are considering or preparing for graduate studies in Alberta.

## Why Pursue Graduate Studies?

Graduate education can open pathways to leadership, research, advocacy, and professional roles across many sectors. For Indigenous students, graduate studies can also support community-driven research, policy change, and the revitalization of Indigenous knowledge systems.

## Application Essentials

Most graduate programs require an undergraduate degree, a minimum GPA, official transcripts, letters of reference, and a statement of purpose or a research proposal. Some programs may also require writing samples.

Applicants are encouraged to clearly articulate how their research or professional goals connect to Indigenous communities, knowledge systems, or advocacy.

## Choosing the Right Program

When selecting a graduate program, consider your academic interests, career goals, and personal responsibilities. You may wish to think about whether you prefer a research-based or course-based program, and whether the institution supports Indigenous methodologies and community-engaged research.

Universities in Alberta offering graduate programs include:

- University of Alberta
- University of Calgary
- University of Lethbridge
- Athabasca University

**Graduate studies can be challenging, but Indigenous students bring vital perspectives, knowledge, and leadership to academic spaces. You are not alone in this process, and there are supports, mentors, and communities ready to help you succeed.**

# Graduate Studies Resource for Indigenous Students in Alberta

## Funding & Financial Support

There are a variety of funding opportunities available specifically for Indigenous graduate students. Federal and National funding may include Canada Graduate Scholarships (Master's and Doctoral) and other national awards.












Alberta-specific funding includes the Alberta Indigenous Graduate Scholarship, administered through Alberta Student Aid. Many Alberta universities also offer Indigenous-specific entrance and continuing awards.

## Cultural & Academic Support

Most Alberta post-secondary institutions have Indigenous Student Centres or Indigenous Services offices that offer academic advising, Elder support, cultural programming, and mentorship opportunities. These supports are available to both graduate and undergraduate students.



# Grants & Scholarships for Indigenous Students

<b>TC Energy</b>	<a href="https://www.tcenergy.com/community-giving/scholarships/Canada-En/">https://www.tcenergy.com/community-giving/scholarships/Canada-En/</a>	
<b>Government of Canada</b>	<a href="https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1351185180120/1351685455328">https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1351185180120/1351685455328</a>	
<b>Indspire</b>	<a href="https://indspire.ca/programs/students/bursaries-scholarships/">https://indspire.ca/programs/students/bursaries-scholarships/</a>	
<b>Student Aid Alberta</b>	<a href="https://studentaid.alberta.ca/scholarships/?c=indigenous">https://studentaid.alberta.ca/scholarships/?c=indigenous</a>	
<b>AISES</b>	<a href="https://aises.org/scholarships/?gad_source=1&amp;gad_campaignid=22918025900&amp;gbraid=0AAAAADb6L-n6fntOAcpdjz5jwOS2Vzcl6&amp;gclid=Cj0KQCQiA7fbLBhDJARIsAOAqhsfQQO9Ap81Fs84aRNPIgTOtphJDEVdfHMzIQsV69BT_ImdNrLLCXO0aApGpEALw_wcB">https://aises.org/scholarships/?gad_source=1&amp;gad_campaignid=22918025900&amp;gbraid=0AAAAADb6L-n6fntOAcpdjz5jwOS2Vzcl6&amp;gclid=Cj0KQCQiA7fbLBhDJARIsAOAqhsfQQO9Ap81Fs84aRNPIgTOtphJDEVdfHMzIQsV69BT_ImdNrLLCXO0aApGpEALw_wcB</a>	
<b>Aboriginal Futures</b>	<a href="https://aboriginalfutures.com/scholarships-bursaries/">https://aboriginalfutures.com/scholarships-bursaries/</a>	
<b>Alberta Blue Cross</b>	<a href="https://www.community.ab.bluecross.ca/programs/indigenous-scholarships.php">https://www.community.ab.bluecross.ca/programs/indigenous-scholarships.php</a>	
<b>TD</b>	<a href="https://www.td.com/ca/en/personal-banking/solutions/student-advice/indigenous-student-scholarships-grants-and-bursaries">https://www.td.com/ca/en/personal-banking/solutions/student-advice/indigenous-student-scholarships-grants-and-bursaries</a>	
<b>Alberta-Pacific Forest Industries Inc.</b>	<a href="https://alpac.ca/community-involvement/scholarships/indigenous-student-scholarships/">https://alpac.ca/community-involvement/scholarships/indigenous-student-scholarships/</a>	
<b>Native Women's Association of Canada</b>	<a href="https://nwac.ca/wg2stgd/direct-support-programs/grants-scholarships/">https://nwac.ca/wg2stgd/direct-support-programs/grants-scholarships/</a>	
<b>ATCO</b>	<a href="https://www.atco.com/en-ca/our-commitment/indigenous-relations/education.html">https://www.atco.com/en-ca/our-commitment/indigenous-relations/education.html</a>	

## Final Words

Grad school isn't for everyone, but if it calls to you, you deserve the tools and support to get there. **We believe in you.** Plan boldly, ask questions, and don't be afraid to try. You're capable of more than you know!

You don't need to have everything figured out today. Just start where you are, and take it step by step. You've got this.

Best of Luck!

### **Special thanks:**

We would like to thank Asha Haywood, Dr. Carrie Dennett, and the Multidisciplinary Degree Society (2025) for their contributions to the handbook.

## Appendix Items

- How to Ask for a Grad School Reference
- RDP Student Support Services
- Off-Campus Resources

# How to Ask for a Grad School Reference

## HOW TO ASK FOR GRAD SCHOOL REFERENCES

Are you getting ready to apply for grad school? Is it time to get references? Here are some tips!

### TYPES OF REFERENCES

#### Academic References

- Most common type
- Includes professors who have taught and assessed you
- Usually need two or three of this type of reference
- Does not include TAs

#### Professional References

- Often required for professional grad programs (MBA, MSW, etc.)
- Professionals who have managed your work and can attest to your suitability to career

#### Clinical References

- Only required for select health programs
- A health professional, ideally someone who you have worked alongside with clients

### HELPFUL TIPS

- Make your request early, but not too early! Aim to ask for a reference one or two months before the deadline.
- Be prepared to provide your reference with the following information: details about the program(s), application deadlines and instructions.
- Timing is important. Some programs require you to complete your whole application before they will send your reference the form, so start your application early.
- Remember to let them know your aspirations and why you are applying. They may ask you for a draft of your statement of intent or a resume to help them with personalizing their letter.
- Be detail oriented, and follow the instructions accurately.

### WHO TO ASK?

- Good reference letters will strengthen your application. Ask individuals who know you well and will endorse your abilities. Ask if they can support your application with a “strong” reference letter.
- Choose a professor you have achieved a good grade from. A “good grade” would be regarded as the grade the university requires for admission within the program. If a program requires a B+, try to ask a professor from a class you have achieved at least that grade in.
- Feeling nervous? Don’t worry. Remember, professors want to support their students with their academic goals.

### BEFORE APPROACHING YOUR REFERENCES

- Every program has different methods of requesting a letter. Know if it will be an electronic reference (most common) or hard-copy letter, when the person will receive it and the deadline.
- Use a two-staged approach: email the individual to make the request for a reference, and then arrange a meeting. You could visit an instructor’s office hours or ask for a meeting to discuss grad school applications.
- Make sure you understand the qualifications/qualities needed in the program, and share these details with your reference to comment on those qualities in the letter.



# How to Ask for a Grad School Reference

## FURTHER EDUCATION FAIR

- Occurs every year during mid-October — more details can be found on our [Careers Events page](#).
- Great opportunity to chat with admission reps about the application process.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### How can I get recognized within a classroom?

- Start early! Get to know your professors before it is time to get a reference — the earlier, the better!
- Attend classes regularly, and sit in the front! Ask and answer questions in class. The discussion board on Avenue to Learn is also a great way to engage in classroom discussions.
- Going to office hours prepared with thoughtful questions is a good way to show that you understand the class material.

### What is the best way to get to know my professors?

- Don't be afraid to talk to your professor about topics not related to classroom material. This could even involve talking to your professor about possible career opportunities within your field of study.
- Ask about their research. Professors love to talk about their research, especially if you have read any of it and have questions on it. This is a great way to set yourself apart and get noticed!
- Consider trying to get volunteer or summer research positions. Or search for teaching assistant roles — something about building relationships with professors outside of the classroom.
- Get involved with student-led faculty societies that might have close connections with faculty members.

### Does my academic reference need to be from a subject area that aligns with my grad application?

- The best references are usually from the people who know you the best. If that happens to be someone who is relevant to the program you are applying to, even better.

### How do I decide who to ask for a reference?

- Consider the most relevant and the most recent options, but prioritize individuals who can comment on your academic or professional abilities for the program.

### What if I don't have any academic references?

- If you have been out of school for more than five years, contact the program and inquire if there are alternative references that they would accept.
- If you graduated less than five years ago, start reconnecting with professors. Help them remember you by sending samples of your work and your LinkedIn URL so they can view your picture.
- If that is not possible, take a university class (level 3 or 4) and build a relationship with the professor. Let them know your interest in grad school. Allow them time to familiarize themselves with your academic abilities.

### What if my reference says no?

- This may be disappointing, but there could be many reasons for this: a lack of time, commitment to writing other reference letters and insufficient knowledge of you and your abilities.
- Gracefully ask for feedback or move on to another professor. This may be a blessing in disguise because you only want strong letters of support.



# How to Ask for a Grad School Reference

## Should I let my references know if I got into the program or not?

- Yes! Update your references to let them know the result, either way. If you didn't get admitted, thank them for their support. If appropriate, let them know your plans for what's next and stay in contact.

## SAMPLE EMAIL

Dear Professor \_\_\_\_\_,

I greatly enjoyed and benefited from the classes (be specific and name the classes/year/grade you received) that I took with you during my degree at McMaster. I am very interested and motivated to further my education in the field by pursuing a (be specific — name the program(s) your are applying to and the institution[s]). I would like to research (specify your research interest) further as I prepare for a career in (specify your career interest).

I was hoping that you would be willing to support my application by writing a strong recommendation letter to support my candidacy. To assist you with your decision, I have included a summary sheet that lists my key papers, including my senior thesis. I have also attached my resume, which will bring you up to date about some of my accomplishments outside the classroom.

Please let me know if you are willing to support my application to grad school. I would be happy to answer any questions and provide further information which will help you to write your recommendation. I would welcome meeting during your office hours to discuss this further.

Thanks so much for all you have done for me and for taking the time to review this request.

Sincerely,

Firstname Lastname  
Your phone number  
Your email  
LinkedIn URL



**Note:** This sample is meant as a guide only. Customize the content to suit your personal situation.



## RDP Student Support Services

<b>Academic Advising</b>	studentconnect@rdpolytech.ca 403-342-3254	<a href="http://www.rdpolytech.ca/student-life/student-services/student-connect-centre">www.rdpolytech.ca/ student-life/student- services/student-connect- centre</a>	
<b>Career Services</b>	careerservices@rdpolytech.ca 403-342-3401	<a href="http://www.rdpolytech.ca/student-life/careers-experiences/career-services">www.rdpolytech.ca/ student-life/careers- experiences/career-services</a>	
<b>Indigenous Student Services</b>	indigenous.services@rdpolytech.ca 403-357-3672	<a href="http://www.rdpolytech.ca/information/indigenous-students/indigenous-student-services">www.rdpolytech.ca/ information/indigenous- students/indigenous- student-services</a>	
<b>Accessibility Services</b>	accessibility@rdpolytech.ca 403-357-3629	<a href="http://www.rdpolytech.ca/student-life/student-services/accessibility-services">www.rdpolytech.ca/ student-life/student- services/accessibility- services</a>	
<b>Library: Writing &amp; Learning Support</b>	LibraryAnswers@rdpolytech.ca 403-342-3344	<a href="http://www.rdpolytech.ca/student-life/campus-services/library">www.rdpolytech.ca/ student-life/campus- services/library</a>	
<b>Counselling Services</b>	counselling@rdpolytech.ca 403-343-4064	<a href="http://www.rdpolytech.ca/student-life/student-services/counselling-services">www.rdpolytech.ca/ student-life/student- services/counselling- services</a>	

## Off-Campus Resources

<b>Universities Canada</b>	<a href="http://www.univcan.ca">www.univcan.ca</a>	
<b>EduCanada</b>	<a href="http://www.educanada.ca/menu.aspx?lang=eng">www.educanada.ca/menu.aspx?lang=eng</a>	
<b>Funding Search Tools</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yconic</li> <li>• Scholarships Canada</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Indspire</li> <li>• Bursaries Canada</li> </ul>