



# Funding for Aboriginal Students

## Aboriginal Learners

Post-secondary education plays a vital role in improving living standards and developing a more equitable society. Investments in post-secondary education provide the foundation for essential improvements to the well-being of Aboriginal peoples. While the educational attainment of the Canadian population has been steadily increasing for the latter half of the past century, Aboriginal peoples have been left without the tools to achieve similar results. Lacking resources and support are some of the barriers that have prevented Canada's Aboriginal peoples' from achieving the same level of socio-economic equality as the Canadian population as a whole. Studies have found that the majority of Aboriginal peoples have the desire to pursue post-secondary studies, yet financial barriers often deter potential students from going on to university or college.

The right to education for Aboriginal peoples is the result of a series of treaties signed over the course of a century and affirmed in Canada's Constitution. However, despite the moral, legal and economic responsibility to ensure access to education for Aboriginal peoples, funding for access to post-secondary education has remained stagnant for more than a decade.

Canada's Aboriginal population is growing at six times the rate of the non-Aboriginal population. According to the 2006 census, over one million people, roughly four percent of Canada's population, identify as Aboriginal. Of these, 48 percent were under the age of 24. Given these numbers, it is estimated that over 300,000 Aboriginal youth could enter the labour force in the next 15 years alone. In May 2009, the Centre for the Study of Living Standards reported that closing the educational gap would lead to an additional \$179 billion in direct GDP growth, and over \$400 billion in total growth over the next 20 years.

## Access to Post-Secondary Education

Educational attainment levels among Aboriginal peoples remain significantly lower than the non-Aboriginal population. In 2006, 34% of Aboriginal persons over the age of 25 did not have a high school diploma compared to 15% of the non-Aboriginal population. Only 8% of Aboriginal persons hold a university degree compared to 23% of the total population.

The gap in participation in post-secondary education is a result of significant and complex barriers that Aboriginal students face.

Research has found that, on average, people from Aboriginal communities are more likely to be debt-averse and less likely to be willing to access loan-based programs if in financial need. Aboriginal students are also more likely to enter post-secondary education at a later age, increasing the number of students with dependents. This leads to higher costs such as childcare and relocation. Aboriginal students are also more than twice as likely to come from rural areas, leading to additional costs.

While it is true for all residents of Canada that children from low-

income families are significantly less likely to pursue a college or university education, this is of particular importance for Aboriginal peoples whose median income is just over half that of the non-Aboriginal population. In addition, approximately 20 percent of the First Nations and Inuit population is unemployed, including a staggering 41 percent of those in the 15-24 age group. This lack of access to work severely limits financial resources for families to pay for the rising costs of university or college.

## History of Aboriginal Education

The rights of Aboriginal peoples were first asserted in the Royal Proclamation of 1763. In exchange for the use of their land and natural resources, Aboriginal peoples were to be provided with the right to self-government and access to education, amongst other things. While responsibility for providing education was assumed by the federal government under the British North America Act of 1867, until the 1940s, First Nations peoples had to give up their status and rights as a "registered Indian" in order to receive funding to attend a post-secondary institution.

While the government has failed to devote adequate resources to support the participation of Aboriginal peoples in university or college, it has an abject history of devoting substantial resources to the cultural assimilation of Aboriginal peoples. In 1891, the Government of Canada implemented mandatory residential schools for Aboriginal youth. In these institutions children were prohibited from speaking traditional Aboriginal languages and practicing Aboriginal culture. Under this program roughly 150,000 children were removed from their families and placed in schools where physical, verbal, and emotional abuse went unrestrained. Subjected to starvation, disease, and abuse, tens of thousands of children died.

On June 11, 2008 the Prime Minister took an historic step by apologising for the terror of the residential school system. In the apology, he acknowledged that the system served to remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, and culture, with the objective of assimilating them into the dominant European culture. The humiliation and trauma experienced in residential schools has led to a number of the problems facing Aboriginal communities today. In many regions, Aboriginal youth are barely a generation removed from residential schools.

## Federal Funding for Aboriginal Education

### History of Funding

For decades, inadequate financial resources were available to support Aboriginal students to pursue post-secondary education. In 1968, the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) began providing direct financial assistance to status First Nations and Inuit students to attend post-secondary education. With an eye to increasing the low numbers of First Nations and Inuit people entering the post-secondary education system, the government launched a new program in 1977, the Post-Secondary Educational Assistance Program (PSEAP). Under the program, funding was made available

to virtually all eligible students. Between 1987 and 1989, numerous reviews and revisions were made to the PSEAP, including limiting the types of educational expenses covered. In 1989, the PSEAP was replaced by the Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP).

These programs were successful in increasing the number of status First Nations and Inuit attending post-secondary education institutions. In 1977-78, only 3,600 students received support to attend college or university; by 1999-2000, over 27,000 students benefited. Despite this investment, educational attainment levels of Aboriginal peoples remain significantly lower than the overall population.

## Post-Secondary Student Support Program

Currently, the federal government provides assistance to status First Nations and Inuit students through the PSSSP, which funds status First Nations and Inuit students to attend post-secondary education. The program is designed to alleviate financial barriers by covering the costs of tuition fees, books, supplies, travel, and living expenses.

Prior to 1992, funding was allocated based on the number of eligible students and their estimated expenses. In 1992 the model shifted from per-student funding to block funding. In 1996 increases in funding capped at two percent annually. As a result of this strict limit, funding has been unable to keep pace with the increasing number of Aboriginal learners, increasing living costs, inflation, and tuition fee increases that average roughly 4% per year.

Prior to the implementation of the funding cap approximately 27,000 Aboriginal students received financial assistance. By 2006, the number had fallen to just over 22,000. The lack of funding has forced communities administering the funds to make difficult decisions about who receives funding each year. It is estimated that between 2001 and 2006, over 10,500 students were denied funding, with roughly 3,000 more students denied each year. Due to the shortfall in funding, priority is often given to shorter college programs to the detriment of more expensive professional or post-graduate programs of study.

## Non-Status First Nations and Métis Students

Non-status First Nations and Métis peoples are not included under federal legislation governing support for Aboriginal peoples. Indian and Northern Affairs Canada's Post-Secondary Education Program is not accessible to these students, leaving many without the financial resources necessary to pursue post-secondary education. In June 2007, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development recommended that the federal government work with Aboriginal organisations to extend eligibility for INAC's Post-Secondary Education Program to non-status students.

## Conclusion

The cost to government to fulfill its treaty responsibilities for Aboriginal education is minimal compared to the long-term implications of failing to do so. As long as the gap in education, employment and income remains, Canada stands to lose \$400 billion in economic growth and spend an additional \$116 billion on social programs and lost tax revenues over the next 20 years alone.

According to the Assembly of First Nations, a total of \$545 million is required to ensure that no Aboriginal student is denied access to post-secondary education due to financial barriers and that those students that are funded receive an adequate level of support. INAC currently provides \$306 million, thus an additional \$239 million would

be required to reach an adequate level of funding. In addition, \$208 million is needed to address the roughly 19,000 students that have previously been denied funding. In Québec, an injection of \$24 million (in addition to \$23 million to address the backlog) would be required to meet the needs of Aboriginal students in that province. In total, this funding would support 36,382 students across Canada, including roughly 4,000 in Québec.

The funding disbursed through the PSSSP has a proven track record for those who can access it. Most Aboriginal students who are able to access funding through the PSSSP succeed in completing their studies and find meaningful work. Regardless of their place of residence, the majority of Aboriginal graduates return to work in their communities and are employed in their field of study, achieving economic self-reliance and helping to develop healthy and stable communities.

## Endnotes

1. Statistique Canada. Recensement de 2006.
2. Centre d'études des niveaux de vie. Mai 2009. The Effect of Increasing Aboriginal Educational Attainment on the Labour Force, Output and the Fiscal Balance.
3. Comité permanent des affaires autochtones et du développement du Grand Nord, Une priorité absolue : l'éducation postsecondaire des Autochtones au Canada : Ottawa, Chambre des communes, Canada, 2007.
4. Centre d'études des niveaux de vie. Mai 2009. The Effect of Increasing Aboriginal Educational Attainment on the Labour Force, Output and the Fiscal Balance. Mai 2009.