

# Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education

## History

The rights of Aboriginal people were first asserted in the Royal Proclamation of 1763. Aboriginal people were provided an education in exchange for the use of their land and resources. Responsibility for providing an education was assumed by the federal government under the British North America Act of 1867, although Aboriginals had to give up their registered Indian status as a prerequisite until mid-way through the 20th century.

Until such a time as the Aboriginal land issues are settled, the federal government has a fiduciary responsibility to continue to provide for the well-being of Aboriginal people. This includes post-secondary education.

## Residential Schools

Before understanding the challenges facing Aboriginal education in the 21st century, it is important to review the federal government's record in "educating" Aboriginal peoples.

Residential schools were primary education institutions jointly run by the federal government and the Catholic Church beginning in the early part of the 20th century and lasting up until the 1980s. Residential schools had one purpose: to assimilate Aboriginal children. Thousands of children were removed from their families and placed in residential schools where physical abuse was rampant. Aboriginal children were prohibited from speaking their language or practising their culture.

Residential schools humiliated and isolated Aboriginal youth, ultimately laying the foundations for much of today's problems in

Aboriginal communities today. First Nations youth are barely one generation removed from residential schools in many regions, and the impact of the federal government's earlier education system is still a reality for many Aboriginals. To a certain extent, perceptions of the relevance of post-secondary education or its assimilationist effect are the lasting effect from one hundred years of residential schools.

## Stagnating Enrolment

The enrolment plateau illustrated by Figure 1 is especially worrisome given the growth of the Aboriginal population. The birthrate for Aboriginals is approximately 70 percent higher than the non-Aboriginal Canadians.

Although university and college enrolment for Aboriginals is at a historic high, previous levels were only a tiny fraction of the non-Aboriginal education levels. Members

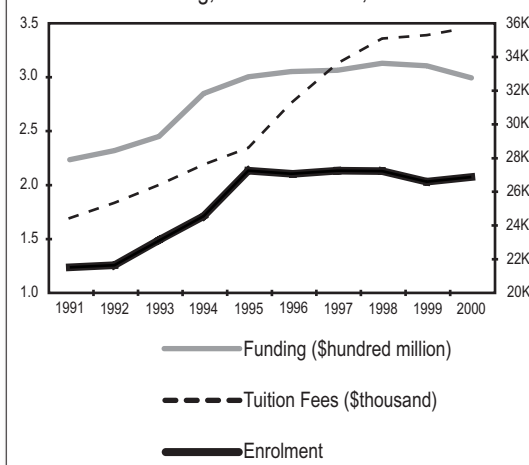
of the Aboriginal community make up an estimated four percent of Canada's total population. One percent of Canada's graduates from universities and two percent of Canada's graduates from colleges are Aboriginal. 2001 Statistics Canada census figures report that 38 percent of Aboriginal workers have post-secondary training while 53.4 percent of their

counterparts have some post-secondary education.

## Financial Barriers Facing Aboriginal Students

Although the federal government has treaty and other obligations to educate First Nation peoples, resources for post-secondary education fall short of meeting the needs of Aboriginal communities.

Figure 1 - Aboriginal Post-Secondary Enrolment, federal funding, and tuition fees, 1991-2000



**“When you’re not sure univervisty is going to be successful and you’re faced with a significant loan, the two in combination are significant disincentives. why would you incur that kind of debt if you don’t know you will succeed?”**

Aboriginal Graduate Interviewee on 1992 report on Aboriginal Education - Univeristy of Manitoba

**It is a common myth that all Aboriginal people receive their post-secondary education for free. In fact, many native bands have funding for less than half of the eligible students.**

## **The Post-Secondary Student Support Program**

The federal government provides funding for Status Indians (Aboriginal peoples living on reserves) through the Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP). Funding for the PSSSP is distributed by bands under their own eligibility criteria. For example, some bands fund more students at a portion of the total cost of their education, whereas other band councils give a grant covering all of a student’s expenses.

When accounting for inflation and population growth, the value of the federal government’s contribution to the PSSSP and other support programs has not been increased meaningfully since the mid-1990s (see Figure 1).

## **2003 Federal Budget**

The 2003 federal budget included a \$12-million endowment to establish post-secondary scholarships for Aboriginal people. The scholarships will be administered by the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation, a private charity that provides funding to Aboriginal students for education and training. No details were provided on the number of scholarships that will be funded through the endowment, nor the dollar amount of individual scholarships.

While new money to assist Aboriginal peoples’ participation in post-secondary education is welcome, this one-time endowment does not constitute the type of long-term investment that is required. When adjusted for inflation, annual funding through Indian and Northern Affairs Canada for Aboriginal post-secondary education actually declined by almost \$14 million between 1998 and 2002 (see Figure 1). At the same time, rising tuition fees mean that post-secondary education costs a student much more than it did a decade ago.

## **Tuition Fees**

As with any non-repayable student financial assistance, skyrocketing tuition

fees have dramatically depreciated the value of programs like the PSSSP. Moreover, the scarcity of education funding for non-Status Aboriginals means that financial barriers to post-secondary education remain insurmountable.

## **Aboriginal Culture and Education Success**

Access to post-secondary education for Aboriginal peoples is a complex puzzle. Without adequate financial support and reduced tuition fees, university and college will remain out of reach for many Aboriginals. But there are also important strategies to consider that will improve the chances of success for Aboriginal students who make it to post-secondary education.

## **Different Needs**

Once on campus, Aboriginal students typically have needs that other students do not necessarily experience. Everything from relocating from one’s community to a lack of role models to approaching the system with different educational objectives, means that the traditional post-secondary education model for non-Aboriginal Canadians is rarely the best fit.

Approaches like delivering education on-site in Aboriginal communities and offering open and visible Aboriginal gathering places have been suggested as ways to reduce the sometimes alienating experience of post-secondary education.<sup>1</sup>

## **Aboriginal Control**

The rights of Aboriginal peoples to self-governance extends to control over the educational process. This is best reflected in Aboriginal-led institutions such as the First Nations University of Canada. The First Nations University and other institutions or programs enable Aboriginal instructors, students, and Elders to develop curriculum that reflect the immediate needs of Aboriginal communities while empowering students to explore traditional ways of knowing not offered in mainstream classes.

<sup>1</sup> Malatest & Associates, 2004