

Funding for Aboriginal Students

Aboriginal Learners

Access to post-secondary education plays a pivotal role in the creation of a more equitable, financially stable, and sustainable society. Yet, there is great disparity in access across the country, not only affecting students, but Canada as a whole. Specifically, there exists a notable lack of resources and support provided to Canada's Aboriginal population. Indeed, in spite of studies indicating that the majority of Aboriginal peoples have the desire to pursue post-secondary studies, financial barriers often deter potential students from going to university or college. In the face of evidence that investments in higher education provide the foundation for essential improvements to the well-being of Aboriginal peoples and help close the gap between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal population, a troubling inequality persists.

The Aboriginal population's access to education goes beyond a mechanism to equalize society. It is a right enshrined in Canada's Constitution as a result of a series of treaties signed over the course of decades. However, in spite of Canada's legal responsibility as well as compelling social motivation, funding for post-secondary education has remained stagnant for over a decade.

Canada's Aboriginal population is growing at six times the rate of the non-Aboriginal population. According to the 2011 census, 1.4 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 2011, 36 percent of Aboriginal persons over the age of 25 did not have a high school diploma compared to 15 percent of the non-Aboriginal population. Only 8 percent of Aboriginal persons hold a university degree compared to 23 percent 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 a 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. 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. As the last residential schools were shut down in the 1980s, Aboriginal youth are barely a generation removed from residential schools in many regions.

Three years after it was initially adopted, the federal government finally endorsed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples on November 12, 2010.

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However, it has yet to address its commitment to the right to self-determination, particularly as it pertains to education, employment, culture, identity, health and language.

History of Funding

For decades, inadequate financial resources were available to support Aboriginal students to pursue post-secondary education. In 1968, the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development (AANDC), formerly the Department Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) began providing direct financial assistance to status First Nations and Inuit students to attend post-secondary education.

It is estimated that between 2001 and 2011, over 18,500 students were denied funding, with roughly 3,000 more students denied each year.

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 (PSSSP)

Currently, the federal government provides assistance to status First Nations and Inuit students through the Post-Secondary Student Support Program (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 were 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 percent 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 2011, over 18,500 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. However, Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada's Post-Secondary Student Support 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 AANDC's Post-Secondary Student Support 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 \$724 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. AANDC 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.

Sources:

1. Statistics Canada, 2011 Census
2. Centre for the Study of Living Standards, The Effect of Increasing Aboriginal
3. Educational Attainment on the Labour Force, Output and the Fiscal Balance, May