

## Aboriginal Post-Secondary Retention and Transition

Canada's aging population is creating, and will continue to exasperate, significant issues of labour capacity. Over the next two decades, Canada's senior population will double while the workforce grows by just eight per cent. This problem will be compounded further as Canada continues to recover from the 2008 global economic slowdown.

Canada's Aboriginal population is growing faster than the general population and, according to Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, increased 20.1 percent from 2001 to 2006. The growing Aboriginal population in Canada represents an opportunity to address a significant portion Canada's impending labour issues.

Education is a critical factor in ensuring that Aboriginal Canadians have success within the workforce. According to the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) 66 percent of Aboriginal Canadians have completed high school (data applies to Aboriginal Canadians of working age 25 to 64 years). Only 8 percent of this group has achieved a University degree. However those who do achieve a bachelor's degree earn almost more than \$20,000 more per year than those with a high school certificate and significantly more like to be employed.

According to Health Canada, "First Nations and Inuit health has improved in areas such as living longer and preventing infant deaths. Despite improvements, gaps remain in the overall health status of First Nations and Inuit compared to other Canadians. For example, First Nations people and Inuit have higher rates of injury, suicide and diabetes." The Public Health Agency of Canada states key factors which influence population health include income and social status; social support networks; education; and employment/working conditions.

A study by the Centre for the Study of Living Standards illustrates the kind of impact that would result if the education and labour market outcomes of Aboriginal Canadians reached the 2001 level of non-Aboriginal Canadians by 2026. Income would increase by \$36.5 billion, total tax revenue would increase by \$3.5 billion and government expenditures could also decrease by \$14.2 billion.<sup>1</sup>

Aboriginal students, however, face unique barriers to post-secondary education. As well as financial, these barriers are social and cultural. Aboriginal students are more likely to be older, with little local family and community support and are more likely to need services like childcare. Further, Aboriginal students often lack sufficient math and science skills when they enter a post-secondary environment.

Some federal departments have created one-time funds for programs at post-secondary institutions for certain types of Aboriginal learners. Some of these initiatives have demonstrated that when Aboriginal students receive targeted supports retention rates can be improved and student success can be achieved. For example, in 2007 Health Canada granted \$1 million over three years to the University of Lethbridge to create the Support Program for Aboriginal Nursing Students (SPANS). This program was created in response to the shortage of Registered Nurses in rural and First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities across Canada. There are several elements to this unique program including a pre-nursing transitional year of study, mentorship by elders, mentorship by Aboriginal nurses, opportunities for social networking and tutoring. The program has recently expanded to assist students working towards degrees in Addictions Counseling and Public Health. The program has grown from seven students to approximately 60 in four years. The retention rate of the program is also an indicator of success: of all the Aboriginal nursing students who started in SPANS, only one is no longer enrolled in a post-secondary program. The majority of Aboriginal students remain in a health-related program at the university.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Sharpe, Jean-François Arsenault, Simon Lapointe and Fraser Cowan, *The Effect of Increasing Aboriginal Educational Attainment on the Labour Force Output and the Fiscal Balance* (Centre for the Study of Living Standards, May 2009) Available on-line <http://www.csls.ca/reports/csls2009-3.pdf>

The federal government announced in its March 22, 2011 budget (which did not pass before the government was defeated) that it is collaborating with the Assembly of First Nations, and has announced that a Panel of Experts will lead an engagement process to develop options for concrete and positive changes in First Nations education to bring greater success and opportunities to First Nations students.

The importance of improving educational outcomes was highlighted in the June 3 Speech from the Throne. "Building on the work of the National Panel on First Nation Elementary and Secondary Education, our Government will engage with partners to make concrete, positive changes to give First Nations children a better education so that they can realize their dreams. We will also expand adult basic education programming in the territories to help to increase education and employment levels."

This commitment was followed up in the Budget Speech. "Building upon a Budget 2010 commitment, the government, in collaboration with the Assembly of First Nations, has announced that a Panel of Experts will lead an engagement process to develop options for concrete and positive changes in First Nations education to bring greater success and opportunities to First Nations students."

In its 2011 June Status Report, the Auditor General of Canada stated that Indian and Northern Affairs Canada has "yet to make progress on closing the education gap" and that the progress of their 2004 recommendation to develop a comprehensive strategy to do so is deemed "unsatisfactory".

### **Recommendation**

That the federal government, as part of its overall strategy for Aboriginal education, fund pilot-projects at Canada's post-secondary institutions to improve Aboriginal student success, retention, and transition into the labour market.