

Partners for a brighter future: The Commitment of Canada's universities to success in Aboriginal education



The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada's
Submission to the National Panel on First Nations Elementary
and Secondary Education

 **AUCC**
Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada
Association des universités et collèges du Canada

Introduction

“We are looking at replacing the legacy of the residential schools with a vibrant new learning culture in every First Nation, grounded in our proud heritage, identity and language. Through a new confidence, we can resume our rightful place as proud Nations walking side-by-side with the Canadian federation and within the North American economy.

“To get there, we need to work with every university and college, with school boards, corporations, and foundations and indeed all people in Canada... But with trust, we can and will achieve great success – uniquely Canadian success grounded in the true history and real potential of this land.”

National Chief Shawn A-in-chut Atleo, Assembly of First Nations

First Nations communities across Canada have identified education as their top priority and the key to ensuring their well-being and prosperity. They are developing strategies that fit their people's needs and are taking ownership of the outcomes. This is a sea change that will benefit all Canadians.

The university community is a committed partner in this change. Universities are developing programs and initiatives that are proven to work in attracting, supporting, and graduating more First Nations students. We recognize that more can – and must – be done. Universities are part of a larger landscape of education and they cannot, alone, contribute fully to Canada unless that entire landscape is healthy and robust. Universities are committed to take part in a conversation across Canada regarding the entire experience of education, for the good of all Canadians. Nowhere is this commitment more important than in the case of First Nations education. As such, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada is pleased to contribute to the National Panel on First Nations Elementary and Secondary Education.

This submission will explore the role universities are playing as partners of First Nations communities in ensuring that students have access to quality education. It builds on the results of the discussions on K-12 education, held at the National Working Summit on Aboriginal Postsecondary Education organized by AUCC and the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation in October 2010. More than 50 participants from universities, colleges, Aboriginal institutes, charities, Aboriginal organizations and the private sector took part. They shared what they had learned in their own work, talked about how to scale up their activities, and committed to more action.

This submission is also informed by AUCC's Answering the Call: *The 2010 inventory of Canadian university programs and services for Aboriginal students*. One of the major findings of the report was that levels of communication and partnership among universities and Aboriginal communities had increased. These partnerships typically view the educational environment as an ecosystem, one that encompasses all levels of learning and has space for many contributors.

It is the spirit of partnership and cooperation that makes the contributions of universities outlined in this submission possible. AUCC hopes this submission will inform the national panel's work and serve to encourage more partnerships among universities and First Nations¹.

¹ A lot of the available statistics refer to Aboriginal which includes the First Nations, the Metis and the Inuit. This submission will be relying on many statistics for Aboriginals, keeping in mind they speak of a broader reality than the First Nations only.

Restoring the balance

The university attainment rate for Aboriginals in 2006 was eight percent - three times below the attainment rate of non-Aboriginal Canadians. While Canada has made great progress in the past few decades, going from just over 100 registered First Nations university students in the late 1960s to an estimated 25,000 to 30,000 Aboriginal university students today, more clearly needs to be done. Improving the education of First Nations is crucial and must start early. Increasing secondary school completion rates, improving the quality of education overall for First Nations is crucial.

Our labour market continues to shift from a resource-based to a knowledge-based economy. Jobs that require a university degree are the fastest-growing in the country. With more than six million baby boomers expected to retire over the next two decades, population growth in Aboriginal communities is a valuable asset for Canada's prosperity.

Employment rates and salaries increase significantly with higher levels of education. For example, the 2006 Census revealed that only about 45 percent of Aboriginal Canadians between the ages of 25 and 64 who have not completed secondary school are employed. Employment levels rise to 67 percent for high school graduates, 75 percent for college graduates and 84 percent for university graduates who obtain a bachelor's degree. The latter is virtually identical to the 83 percent employment rates for non-Aboriginal bachelor's graduates. Moreover, Aboriginal Canadians with a bachelor's degree earn \$55,000 a year average, compared to \$36,000 for those with only high school credentials.

Increasing access to postsecondary education for First Nations youth should be a priority. To do so, we must increase the number of First Nations students who complete high school. And we must make sure that those who complete high school have the financial resources for university or college.

Towards a culturally relevant education

Universities play a fundamental role in enhancing the efficacy and quality of K-12 First Nations education. Universities educate teachers, principals and school administrators. They provide continuing education to education practitioners. And university faculty undertake research aimed at developing new ideas and strategies to enhance K-12 education for Aboriginals.

Teachers in First Nations schools and communities require a specialized set of skills and knowledge. They need to have the ability to address the distinct needs of many First Nations learners, and possess knowledge about the cultural environment in which they work. Universities are aware of these needs and faculties of education have taken action. In June 2010, prominent Aboriginal leaders and the Association of Canadian Deans of Education signed a landmark accord that aimed to "improve the quality of knowledge, understanding and pedagogic skills that all educators gain about Indigenous education and Indigenous knowledge systems."

First Nations' students are most successful when curriculum incorporates their people's knowledge, history and culture and is relevant to their life experiences and communities. As many First Nations' schools operate independently from a broader administrative structure, they must often develop their own curriculum. University faculty members partner with First Nations' communities in curriculum development. Moreover, many educational researchers in Canada's universities are working to improve the learning outcomes of First Nations youth and integrate Aboriginal culture and values into the curriculum.

Researchers at Laurentian University have created the Internet High School, a culturally responsive and responsible initiative that provides education to Anishinaabe youth in their communities. The Internet High School now reaches more than two dozen communities across Ontario and Manitoba, enabling youth to maintain important family and community connections, while obtaining a high school diploma. Since 2008, the Internet High School has also begun to help these communities to preserve the Anishinaabe language.

TRAINING MORE FIRST NATIONS TEACHERS

Aboriginal peoples are seriously underrepresented in the teaching profession. Data from the 2006 Census shows that Canada has one bachelor of education degree holder for every 18 school-aged children, but there is just one Aboriginal person with a bachelor of education degree for every 54 school aged Aboriginal children.

We know that the presence of Aboriginal teachers in a school can have a strong positive influence on First Nations students, especially in increasing their desire to succeed². Universities are working to address this gap. Many education programs offer programs specially designed for Aboriginal learners, with features such as alternative admissions processes and learning opportunities in the community. More can and must be done.

AUCC members would welcome a dialogue with the First Nations, the federal government and the provinces on strategies to increase the number of First Nations teachers.

The University of New Brunswick's bachelor of education for Aboriginal students is offered in two locations near First Nations communities (Miramichi and the Upper St. John River Valley). Some on-campus attendance is required, but the bulk of the program is delivered through a mixture of online learning and local delivery. The program is offered in partnership with the Mawiw Council and Union of New Brunswick Indians.

Going beyond K-12 completion

Students are often motivated to complete their studies because they believe it will help them accomplish a personal goal or lead to a better career. Yet in 2007, research from the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation showed that only 70 percent of Aboriginal youth aspire to a postsecondary education, as compared to 90 percent of the non-Aboriginal population.

AUCC member universities are working to increase the number of Aboriginal Canadians who aspire to a university education. Universities across Canada are investing their own resources in programs to support, motivate and encourage First Nations youth to complete the K-12 curriculum and transition into post-secondary education. University leaders are also looking at how to “scale up” such initiatives so they can reach even more First Nations students.

OUTREACH AND TRANSITION PROGRAMS

A number of universities offer programing that enhances the academic experience for K-12 Aboriginal students, often providing experiences that cannot be acquired in a classroom. Many of the programs developed by universities focus on promoting fields of study where there are few First Nations university graduates such as science and business. These types of programs often partner with Aboriginal organizations and the private sector to enhance their reach and effectiveness.

² One recent study from the Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research found that having Aboriginal teachers in schools can increase the desire of Aboriginal students to succeed. Though this study focused on Métis Canadians in urban settings, the findings are nonetheless relevant for First Nations Education. A teacher can serve as a role model for her/his students and the impact on Aboriginal students can be profound.

The University of Victoria's Office of Indigenous Affairs has coordinated the implementation of the STEM Program (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) with departments at the university to deliver science-based workshops in after-school programs to Grade one – 12 students in partnership with: Tsawout First Nation, T'Souke Nation, Lau-Wel-new Tribal School, Tseycum Nation, and Victoria Native Friendship Centre.

Also, in collaboration with First Nations communities, universities have developed programs that help to attract First Nations students and provide them with assistance to ensure academic success and the completion of their studies. In some cases, universities have implemented transition and "reach-back" programs designed to help First Nations students complete their high school curriculum while attending first-year university level classes and earning credits.

The University of Saskatchewan's Arts & Science Transition Program provides Aboriginal students whose high school grades fall below admission requirements a way into university. Students take university credit courses in small classes, while still having time to complete Grade 12 or upgrade their high school marks. As a result of programs like this, nearly nine percent of the U of S's student population self-identifies as Aboriginal.

ROLE MODELS AND MENTORING

In the Environics Institute's landmark 2009 Urban Aboriginal People's Study, 62 percent of Aboriginal people intending to go to postsecondary education said they were influenced by a role model they admired. Universities help develop First Nations role models, often serving as "living example" of the opportunities university education can afford. A number of university initiatives involving Aboriginal role models incorporate innovative service learning opportunities, which connect students to communities through course-based volunteer opportunities, thus further breaking down barriers.

Over the past three years, the Nipissing First Nation has partnered with the Biidabhan Community Service Learning Program from Nipissing University. Nipissing Nation high school students benefit from the additional one-on-one help from the university students. At the same time, university students benefit from experiencing the First Nation community at the grassroots level.

More Aboriginal role models are needed at all levels of university education. AUCC has recently recommended funding for scholarships for graduate students, who will become future faculty members – and role models – at universities across the country.

RAISING AWARENESS

Canada's universities recognize that effective First Nations student recruitment efforts start well before last year of high school. They have partnered with schools and communities to create initiatives across the country that make First Nations children and youth and their parents consider university as a possibility for their future. These recruitment initiatives not only provide students with information about university courses, but also careers a degree can lead to and financial aid and student support programs that are available. Universities believe that as First Nations students become more aware of the opportunities for higher education, they will be more motivated to complete high school.

An unfinished success story

Universities are experiencing record levels of enrolment by Aboriginal Canadians. The combination of outreach efforts by universities, First Nations communities increasingly making education the priority, and the student persistence are clearing paying off.

The enrolment of Aboriginal students at universities across Canada continues to grow. This year alone the University of Winnipeg saw a 24 percent increase in Aboriginal applicants and their Aboriginal student population is nearing 1,000. Simon Fraser University has admitted 200 new Aboriginal students this fall with a total Aboriginal student enrolment of approximately 500.

The Integrative Science program at Cape Breton University contains science courses that bring together science knowledge as conventionally understood, combined and enriched with understandings from the holistic world views of Aboriginal Peoples, especially the Mi'kmaq First Nations in Atlantic Canada. The Integrative Science program is a concentration within the Bachelor of Science in Community Studies four-year program. There is a formal partnership with the Unama'ki Institute of Natural Resources based in the First Nations Community of Eskasoni, N.S. The program is guided by a Tier One Canada Research Chair in Integrative Science.

The benefits of this success to First Nations elementary and secondary education are also clear: as more graduates contribute to the success of their communities and provide role models for younger people, there will be greater success at the K-12 level.

However, Canada stills needs to do more. The gap between the educational attainment of First Nations and that of the general population must be closed. Canada's educational environment must be viewed as an ecosystem that encompasses all levels of learning.

Our submission has highlighted a number of initiatives by universities across the country, that aim to improve First Nations education and raise completion rates at the K-12 level. The wide range of programs under way at universities are proven to work, and such good practices can be scaled up at institutions across the country. Universities currently provide such programs largely by allocating their own available resources. More could be done with additional federal government funding and we invite the national panel to consider this as one option. We know the need to improve First Nations education is urgent. We know the need for action is now.

Canada's universities reaffirm their commitment to partner with First Nations across the country to develop more solutions to enhance First Nations education, and welcome the dialogue the national panel is creating.

Additional information

For additional information on universities' efforts to improve the educational experience of all Aboriginal people, including First Nations, please consult the following documents:

- Moving Forward: National Working Summit on Aboriginal Postsecondary Education – <http://www.aucc.ca/media-room/publications/moving-forward-national-working-summit-on-aboriginal-postsecondary-education>
- The Value of a Degree for Aboriginal Canadians – <http://www.aucc.ca/media-room/publications/the-value-of-a-degree-for-aboriginal-canadians>
- Answering the call: The 2010 inventory of Canadian university programs and services for Aboriginal students – <http://www.aucc.ca/media-room/publications/aboriginal-education-answering-the-call-2010>

