

# Indigenous Students in Post-Secondary

Indigenous students face issues with access, education attainment, and participation in post-secondary education across Canada. Indigenous post-secondary attainment is not only an education issue, but has larger consequences for income inequality and patterns of chronic unemployment. Education needs to be a top priority in the federal and provincial governments' reconciliation frameworks. The gaps in attainment are a part of systemic disadvantages that must be corrected in order to achieve reconciliation with Indigenous peoples in Canada.

## Education Attainment Levels in Canada

In BC, Indigenous students are overrepresented in Adult Basic Education, or high school upgrading courses, with 19% of ABE students identifying as Indigenous.<sup>1</sup> This highlights the barriers Indigenous students must overcome before even entering college or university.

According to the 2016 Census, almost one-half (49.3%) of Indigenous people age 25 to 64 had a post-secondary qualification in 2011. In comparison, two-thirds of non-Indigenous people had obtained a post-secondary designation.

The numbers in British Columbia are similar to those across Canada, though the university degree attainment rate for non-Indigenous learners tends to be higher in the BC than in other provinces.

For trades certificates and college diplomas, Indigenous students have comparable education attainment levels to non-Indigenous students. The largest gap between the groups is among those who have not completed high school and have no other formal educational attainment: 25.6% of Indigenous people have no educational qualification, compared to 10.8% of non-Indigenous people.

The primary difference in post-secondary qualifications was in university degrees where the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people was nearly 20%.

The attainment gap exists as an unfortunate reminder of Canada's colonial history. This gap is maintained by continued underfunding of on-reserve schools and lack of access to basic services, both of which reinforce existing barriers to education attainment.<sup>2</sup>

## University Attainment: The widening gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people across Canada

For decades, the proportion of Indigenous people with university degrees has remained lower than their non-Indigenous peers. In recent years, despite the increasing proportion of Indigenous people with university degrees, the gap has been widening, not shrinking. The proportion of Indigenous people who have a university degree has more than quadrupled compared to 25 years ago, yet the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people has more than doubled over the same period.

Proportion of Canadian Population with a University Degree (age 24-64)



Source: Statistics Canada, 2006, 2016 Census; National household survey, 2011

These disparities show that there is still an issue with attainment and access to post-secondary education for Indigenous peoples in Canada. These gaps are particularly large in the extreme categories, which means those without a certificate/diploma and without university degrees are most disadvantaged compared to their non-Indigenous peers when it comes to the job market.

## Indigenous Students in BC Post-Secondary Education

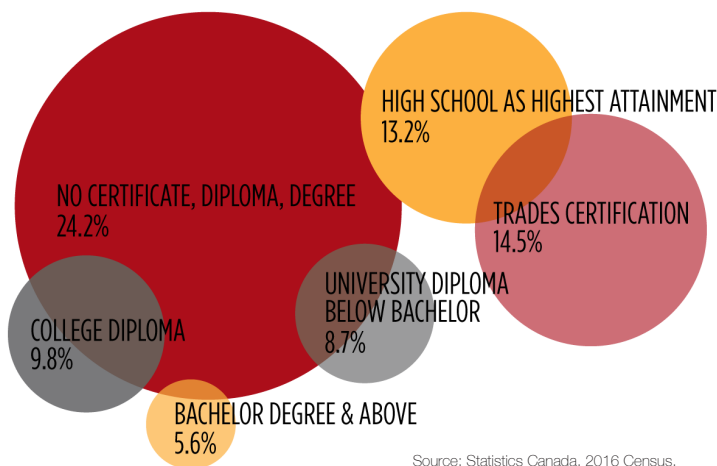
In 2016, self-identified Indigenous students made up only 6% of the student population BC public post-secondary institutions. These numbers vary widely based on institution, ranging from 2% at Simon Fraser University to 77% at Nicola Valley Institute of Technology.<sup>3</sup>

The reasons for the vastly different representation of Indigenous students across institutions appear to be due

to institutions' own commitment to Indigenous education: some institutions provide more support and awareness of Indigenous issues, such as financial support and Indigenous resource centres, than others. Additionally, the inclusion of Indigenous-focused programs has a positive impact on Indigenous enrolment. Moreover, off-reservation travel and accommodation options and their accessibility vary greatly between institutions.

## Unemployment Based on Attainment Levels

The level of education attainment impacts employment. According to the 2016 Census, Indigenous people age 25 to 64 are less likely to be employed compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts: 62% versus 76%. Among those with less than a high school degree across Canada, Indigenous people have a lower employment rate (39.7%) than non-Indigenous people (56.7%), making educational attainment even more important for Indigenous people. Across Canada, unemployment rates decrease as educational attainment increases, particularly for Indigenous people:



Source: Statistics Canada, 2016 Census.

## Unaffordability of Poverty

Higher unemployment rates means many Indigenous people live below the poverty line. From an economic perspective, poverty is costly in terms of health care, crime, and foregone economic activity. In BC, doing nothing to reduce poverty is costing society \$9 billion per year, which is over 4% of BC's GDP.<sup>4</sup> Investing in Indigenous education is a necessary step towards reconciliation and provides a pathway to stronger economic stability and reducing income inequality.

## Solutions to Chronic Unemployment

Many of the disadvantages facing Indigenous peoples such as unemployment and lower incomes can be traced back to the gap in educational attainment between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. The 2016 Census found that across Canada, Indigenous people's average income was \$44,694, which is \$11,134 less than their non-Indigenous counterparts.<sup>5</sup> Indigenous workers made less than non-Indigenous workers across every level of education attainment. While education may not fix every inequality, "increased support for education may be the single most important investment that can be made to improve the economic opportunities for Aboriginal people in Canada."<sup>6</sup> In order for true reconciliation to be achieved, the government needs to take steps to reduce the attainment gap.

## TRC Recommendations for Reconciliation Through Education

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Report addresses the role of post-secondary education in supporting reconciliation efforts and recommendations are directed at both the federal and provincial governments. The TRC recommendations for post-secondary education focus on providing necessary funding to educate teachers on how to integrate Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods in the classroom. Incorporating Indigenous education and methods will help address Indigenous barriers to post-secondary education—specifically access, attainment, and participation. More support from instructors and classroom environments will help Indigenous students feel more welcomed in post-secondary institutions and reduce some barriers to post-secondary attainment. The Report also calls on governments to close the education and employment gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. To achieve these recommendations, institutions need to be properly funded in order to provide adequate services and supports for Indigenous learner retention, to indigenize teaching methods and campuses, and ultimately, to create a system of accessible and affordable education for our most marginalized community members.

## Endnotes

1. Government of British Columbia (2016). Adult basic education (ABE) student enrollment summary 2015. Central Data Warehouse and Education Data Warehouse.
2. Sachgau, O. (2015). Canada's education system failing aboriginal students. The Globe and Mail.
3. BC Ministry of Advanced Education (2016). Post-secondary central data warehouse standard reports, October 2016 data submission; BC Ministry of Advanced Education (2016). Student transitions project fall 2016, data submission.
4. Ivanova, I. (2011). The cost of poverty in BC. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.
5. Statistics Canada (2016). 2016 Census. Catalogue No. 98-400-X2016268.
6. Wilson, D., & Macdonald, D. (2010). The income gap between Aboriginal peoples and the rest of Canada. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.