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## Editors' Commentary: The Challenges in Improving Indigenous Educational Attainment

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## **Abstract**

Education has been called the “new buffalo” for its potential to contribute to the economic, social, and political well-being of Indigenous peoples in Canada (Stonechild, 2006). Despite gains in education among Aboriginal peoples in Canada, there continues to be gaps in educational attainment. This editors' introduction explores some of the realities underlying educational trends among Indigenous peoples in order to set the stage for the articles in this special edition of the International Indigenous Policy Journal examining educational pathways among Indigenous learners.

## **Keywords**

education, Aboriginal, post-secondary education, Indigenous, economic development

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## Editors' Commentary: The Challenges in Improving Indigenous Educational Attainment

Education has been called the “new buffalo” for its potential to contribute to the economic, social, and political well-being of Indigenous peoples in Canada (Stonechild, 2006). To be sure, improvements in educational attainment can have important positive impacts. Increasing educational attainment in communities leads to benefits such as economic development and growth, enhanced innovation, improved social cohesion, reduced reliance on social assistance, and positive inter-generational effects (Wolfe & Haveman, 2001). There have been real strides forward since the 1990s. In Canada, for example, the absolute numbers of Indigenous peoples completing high school and going on to post-secondary training have increased. Clearly, there is a large and growing number of highly educated Aboriginal peoples.<sup>1</sup> For example:

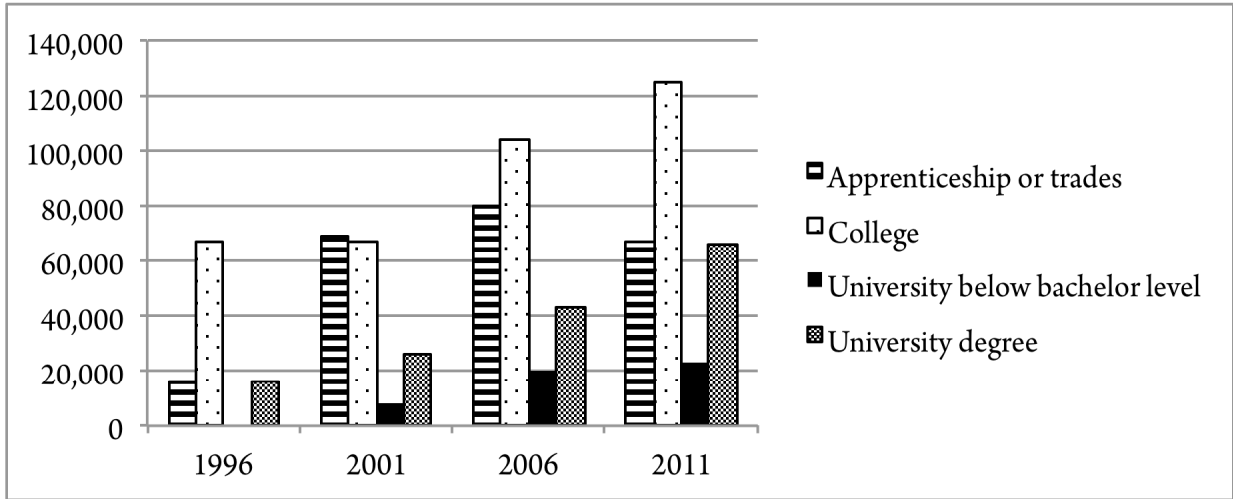
- The 1996 to 2011 period saw a total *cumulative* increase of 183,170 post-secondary education graduates.
- In 2011, 281,765 Aboriginal people reported post-secondary education as their highest level of educational attainment.
- Post-secondary education gains were achieved for all Aboriginal groups (Status and non-Status, on reserve and off reserve, and First Nations, Inuit, and Métis) (Gordon & White, 2013).

Figure 1 shows these positive educational trends. That said, in order to make progress in Canada and see real, lasting positive improvements take place, there are several realities that have to be understood. The first is:

**High school completion.** The first reality is that there are still far too many Indigenous youth who are not completing high school. If we look at the data from 1996 to the present, the numbers are staggeringly high: the number of Indigenous persons without a high school diploma increased by 80,165 between 1996 and 2011. When we project the trend out to 2016 and 2021, we see a further increase of 50,000 people. Table 1 provides details and Figure 2 illustrates the alarming trend.

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<sup>1</sup> All the data and figures relating to post-secondary education and high school attainment are from the paper by Catherine Gordon and Jerry P. White, “Supply Side of Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education in Canada,” which was delivered at the Indigenous Issues in Post-Secondary Education: Transitions to the Workplace conference in Toronto, Ontario, Canada in October 2013.



**Figure 1. Post-secondary education type for Aboriginal population aged 25 - 64 years, 1996 - 2011, in absolute numbers.**

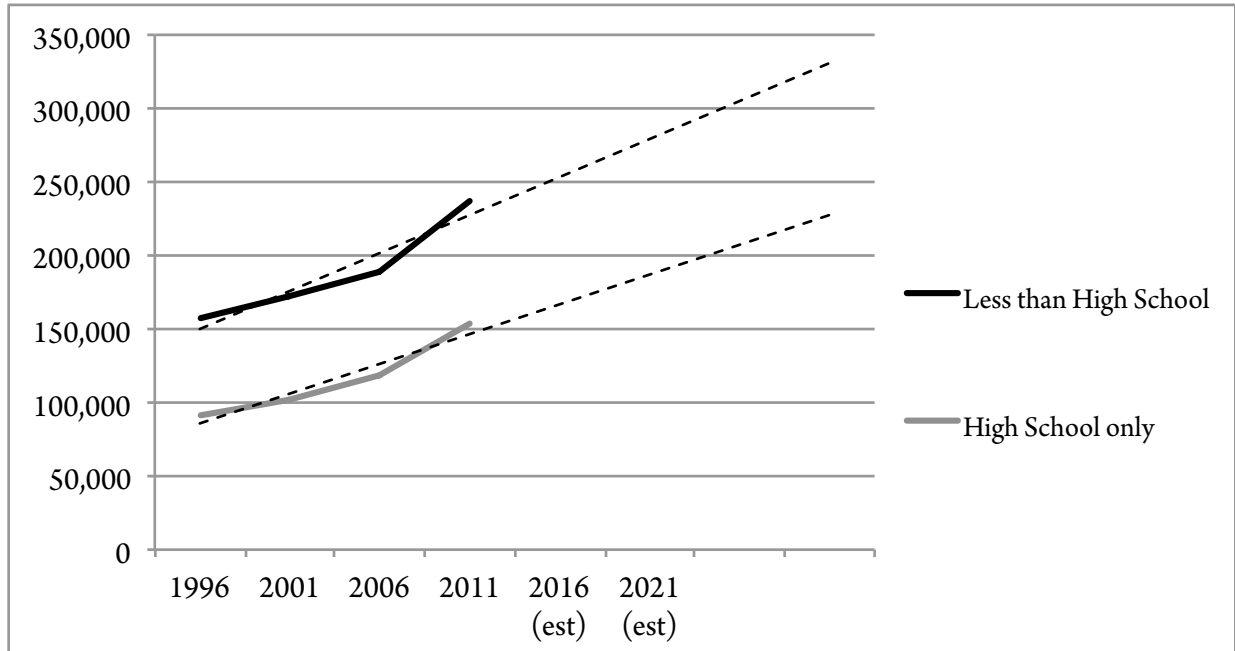
Sources: Statistics Canada (1996, 2001, 2006, 2011).

Note. University below bachelor level became a category in the 2001 Census; therefore, data are not available for 1996.

**Table 1. Less than High School and High School as Highest Educational Attainment for Aboriginal Population, 25 - 64 years, 1996 - 2011 in absolute numbers and 2016 - 2021 as estimated numbers**

	1996	2001	2006	2011	Increase 1996 - 2011	Projected 2016	Projected 2021
Less than high school	156,605	171,710	189,395	236,770	80,165	253,165	278,983
High school	91,275	101,355	118,960	152,840	61,565	166,683	186,913

Note. Sources: Gordon & White (2013); Statistics Canada (1996, 2001, 2006, 2011).



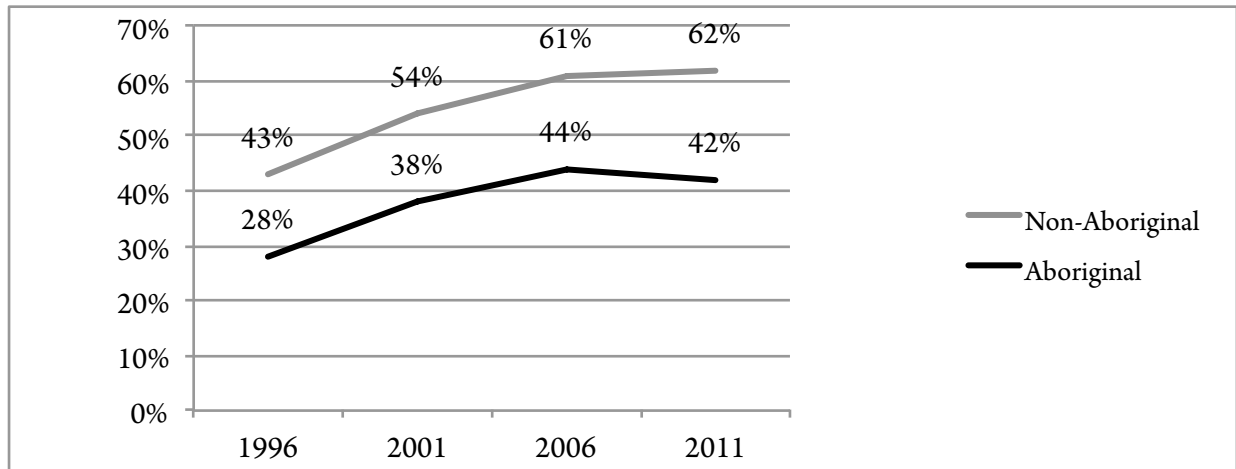
**Figure 2. Highest educational attainment less than high school and high school only for Aboriginal population, aged 25 - 64 years, 1996 – 2011 in absolute number and 2016 – 2021 as estimated numbers.**

Sources: Gordon & White (2013); Statistics Canada (1996, 2001, 2006, 2011).

These findings underscore the observation by Mendelson (2006) that a key to increasing post-secondary education is to improve completion rates from junior kindergarten to Grade 12. We agree with Mendelson and would extend this further to argue that there also needs to be a focus on early learning and childcare. We also note that there are many additional considerations in terms of improving graduation rates: some are resources; some are curriculum; some are social capital and norm issues; some relate to the policies and practices bred by colonialism; and still others relate to the lack of economic opportunity seen by Indigenous youth, which dissuades them from seeking credentials (Gordon & White, 2013).

The second reality is:

**The gap.** There is an unacceptable 20-percentage point gap in post-secondary educational attainment between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations (see Figure 3 below). The largest disparity is university attainment. Projections by Gordon and White (2013) for 5 and 10 years from now reveal that this alarming trend will continue. Within our current policy system, the difference between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal populations is projected to stagnate; the gap is estimated to widen for those living on reserve, all Status Aboriginals, and the Inuit population. Fundamental changes that appreciate the variation among Aboriginal populations are warranted.



**Figure 3. Post-secondary educational attainment for the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal population aged 25 - 64 years, 1996-2011.**

Sources: Gordon & White (2013); Statistics Canada (1996, 2001, 2006, 2011).

The third reality is the impact of colonialism:

**The history of colonialism.** Contact with Europeans was not a positive experience and the subsequent 500 years have had disastrous impacts on Indigenous civilizations. This has led to major problems that have impacted education in many ways. As Peters (2013) noted:

First Nations have long had their own modes of education. These have not been static, but evolved, shifted, and changed over time. While each nation has its own education methods, common practices across nations have included ceremonies, oral histories, teaching stories, learning games, apprenticeships, formal instruction, and tag-along teaching (Buffalohead, 1976 as cited in Hampton, 1995). Traditionally, the teachers were the community members, and each adult had a responsibility to each child to ensure they knew how to live a good life. [...] Indigenous modes of education were disrupted by the arrival of Europeans [...] but it is important to remember that Indigenous knowledge and methods of teaching and learning have continued and are being revitalized. (Peters, 2013, p. 6)

In addition to disrupting traditional educational systems, the introduction of “European methods” and the imposition of government policies have inflicted great harm on communities and individuals. The residential school system, for example, has produced trauma that has been passed on intergenerationally.

**Making change partner based.** The approaches Canada and several other countries have used in trying to make change have lacked the needed consultation. As a signatory to the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP), Canada has a commitment to respect and support the individual and collective rights of Indigenous peoples outlined in the declaration (United Nations, 2008). As Peters pointed out (2013):

While UNDRIP is an aspirational document and does not have legal force, it is a powerful statement of the common concerns of Indigenous peoples around the world. The articles of the declaration related to education reiterate what Indigenous organizations in Canada have been saying for decades: Indigenous peoples have the right to control their own educational systems, provide education in their own languages and cultures, and to have the dignity and diversity of their cultures respected and reflected in educational institutions. (p. 204)

The Federal Government of Canada recently released a draft First Nations Education Act (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2013b; see also Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2013a). This proposal has been met by real opposition by First Nations leaders. Chief Morley GooGoo, who chairs the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) educational council, has stated that the Act is unacceptable: “The proposal doesn’t acknowledge that First Nations are ready to take care of their own education systems and programs” (cited in Roman, 2013, para. 5). The AFN has pointed out that there simply was not enough consultation on the content and it was not a partnership driven process. As well, critics have pointed out that there is no commitment by the Government to resource the provisions of the new act (Richards & Mendelson, 2013).

The final reality relates to:

**Basic inequalities.** Education is not an end in itself. We learn from formal institutions and our family, elders, and mentors throughout our lives. However, when it comes to attending school and all that entails, we want to put that learning to good use. In a way, people are drawn to engage in educational processes because they see a value in doing so. For a young person in Piapot Saskatchewan or Nunavut to choose to stay in school, they need know there is a purpose: That is one of the elephants in the room. Poor employment opportunities, lack of economic development, and other related conditions will discourage high school completion and dissuade youth from continuing to post-secondary education. Therefore, economic inequalities are also a crucial part of the problem.

We hope this edition of the *International Indigenous Policy Journal* makes a contribution to the discussion taking place today in Canada and other countries.

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