

Canadian Politics and Public Policy

Policy



**Canadian
Universities**



Indspire's experience has been that when Aboriginal students "we support financially and in other ways" on entering university, 93 per cent graduate. McMaster University photo.

A Call for Quality Education

Roberta Jamieson

Education is a key principal to transforming the relationship between Canada and Indigenous Peoples, if there is to be the reconciliation for which the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has laid the groundwork. For indigenous people, it will increase capacity to make constructive change leading to better economic circumstances not just for their own communities but for the country as a whole. Canada's postsecondary institutions have shown initiative and leadership as partners in our mission to close the access and achievement gaps between indigenous students and their non-indigenous fellow Canadians.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) laboured six years to gather the evidence it required to set out its recommendations. This autumn marks 15 months since it issued a summary of the final report. Has it changed anything in the relationship between Indigenous Peoples and Canadians generally?

Well, yes. There has been some noticeable improvement. Even before it reported, the Commission's work had set into motion what it hoped would become "a new consciousness in Canada." The commissioners understood from the start they were "a catalyst for

deepening our national awareness of the meaning and potential of reconciliation,” but that it would “take many heads, hands and hearts, working together at all levels of society to maintain momentum in the years ahead. It will also take sustained political will at all levels of government and concerted material resources.”

One of the areas the TRC identified as holding particular promise is education. In fact, it is a key driver for change overall.

One paramount change required is the closing of the gap between indigenous student high school graduation and the graduation rate of Canadians generally. On average, about 37 per cent of First Nations students graduate from high school, compared to a near 87 per cent among Canadian students generally.

This distressing fact has behind it a number of key factors, including poverty. Earlier this year, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives found that 76 per cent of the First Nations children in Manitoba—and more than half across Canada—lived below the poverty line.

The poverty of the children is too often matched by underfunding of their schools—a huge gap in funding of First Nation schools as compared to neighbouring schools. A Manitoba reserve school that was recently placed in the provincial school system and received an additional \$5,000 per student, showed dramatic immediate improvement in what had been a serious failure in acceptable results.

But failure to achieve in impoverished elementary and secondary schools goes beyond the lack of funds. Too often, the curriculum is irrelevant to the geography, the culture, the language of our peoples. Add to this effects of residential schools created so young children could be taken away from their parents, forbidden to speak their languages. When those children became parents, too often they not only had the problems that young people have when they have

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been raised without parents, but they had little experience in knowing what they themselves had to do to be good parents.

We have been caught in this cycle for decades. When any people has had generations whose formal education showed no respect for culture, tradition, language, they can expect their children and youth will not have much enthusiasm for participating in the same process.

All of this is why Indspire, the national charity I commit my energies to as President and CEO, started a “K-12 Institute” to support educators and community-based initiatives to restore language, culture, *our* history and knowledge so we can continue to survive as indigenous people and as well gives students pride, gives culture a future, and is transferrable anywhere in Canada and beyond.

It is exciting to see what can happen with the right mix. Look at the Mi’kmaq success rate in Nova Scotia: they graduate over 88 per cent of students that begin Grade 12 on reserves. Why does this happen? Mi’kmaq schools are run by Mi’kmaq people through an education authority, Mi’kmaw Kina’matnewey. Set up in 1999 by the federal *Mi’kmaq Education Act*, the authority boasts over 50 per cent Mi’kmaq teachers and a curriculum that stresses Mi’kmaq culture and language.

The TRC saw this kind of need for even younger children: Call to Action number 12 states, “We call upon the federal, provincial, territorial, and Aboriginal governments to develop *culturally appropriate* early childhood education programs for Aboriginal families.”

Education is the key to our future, our future as Indigenous Peoples.

We need those high school graduates, confident in their culture and identity, so we can close a second gap—just 10 per cent of our people graduate from university, compared to about 27 per cent of Canadians generally. That deficiency affects our ability to decolonize our relationship with Canada, to be able to play our own role in the reconciliation process, to create healthy communities, to make them prosper and to contribute our full potential to our people, to Canada and to the world.

The need to indigenize the postsecondary education experience is something that most universities have recognized as essential. Canadian universities are taking a number of impressive initiatives to address this challenge. Universities Canada worked with Indspire to develop an action plan that showed definite results. (The report, *Moving Forward: National Working Summit on Aboriginal Postsecondary Education*, is online at <https://www.univcan.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/aboriginal-moving-forward-report-summit-dec-2010.pdf>). When the Truth and Reconciliation report came out, the action plan was expanded. Today, some two-thirds of Canadian universities have transition programs to help indigenous students be successful.

Last spring, Governor General David Johnston invited the chancellors of Canada’s universities to Rideau Hall to discuss the role postsecondary institutions could play in making reconciliation happen. The discussion focused on both the change that is

already happening and the change that must yet take place.

Building on the findings of the TRC, the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences has announced its commitment to contribute to reconciliation between aboriginal and non-aboriginal peoples. “Our focus is on the crucial role that postsecondary education, the humanities and social sciences will play in the process of research, understanding and action towards reconciliation.”

The Federation has adopted the “Touchstones of Hope Principles and Processes” to guide its work on reconciliation. These principles are laid out in a four-phase reconciliation process: truth-telling, acknowledging, restoring and relating. In this framework, reconciliation is recognized as being a movement that must be built and sustained—it is not an event or a short-term project.

With university educators becoming increasingly aware of the inadequate role that postsecondary institutions played in the past in training teachers, the federation is advocating support for the TRC’s Call to Action number 62: postsecondary institutions should have sufficient funding to educate teachers on how to integrate Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods into classrooms.

It also supports Call to Action number 16: “We call upon postsecondary institutions to create university and college degree and diploma programs in aboriginal languages.”

There is a particularly important role for Indigenous postsecondary institutions such as the Six Nations Polytechnical Institute in my own Grand River Territory—they have high potential to develop capacity in our communities. In Saskatchewan there is the First Nations University of Canada.

In 2015, Ontario announced \$97 million in funding over three years for indigenous postsecondary education and training. In fact, a new stand-alone *Aboriginal Institutes Policy* is

planned to incorporate indigenous-owned-and-controlled postsecondary institutes into Ontario’s postsecondary education and training system.

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But even then, if our students are to obtain that education, there is a third gap to be eliminated—the gap between indigenous students who want a postsecondary education and the funds they have available to cover the costs. The Commission spoke to that issue in Call to Action number 11: “We call upon the federal government to provide adequate funding to end the backlog of First Nations students seeking a postsecondary education.”

Indspire can also be witness to that situation. It raises millions of dollars every year from individuals, governments and the corporate sector so that indigenous people are not denied the opportunity for postsecondary education for the sole reason that they lack funds. In 2015-16, Indspire awarded over \$12.2 million through 3,792 bursaries and scholarships to Indigenous students across Canada, making us the largest funder. Our experience at Indspire is that when students we support financially and in other ways get into university, 93 per cent graduate.

But we are painfully conscious that we are far short of meeting the need—last year we had sufficient funds to meet only 10.7 per cent of the amounts sought by applicants.

Can Canada say it is too expensive to ensure that schools for indigenous children have the same amount of funding received by neighbouring schools, if we ensure child welfare services for indigenous children are fund-

ed similarly to provincial agencies?

Of course not. Such an argument is legally and morally offensive. Not only that we must consider the other side of the ledger: the report of the Centre for the Study of Living Standards calculated a few years back that if Canada could close the “education gap” between indigenous students and Canadian students generally, more than \$115-billion would be saved in social, health, and other costs over a short period of time, while at the same time adding more than \$401-billion to Canada’s GDP.

Both federal and provincial governments must take the lead in making the investments and setting policy. But they alone cannot make change happen. All other sectors must play a role if we are to succeed in creating a better future for Canada. It will only be then that we will be better able to cross the threshold into a new era of true reconciliation.

Think of the power of just those students who received Indspire bursaries this past year alone: 127 engineers, 128 doctors, 284 in science related fields, 353 nurses, 409 in business, 463 in education, plus others in social work, technical studies, trades, and social sciences. These are real people in real time providing Indigenous People and Canada alike with real opportunity.

If we can support today’s students today, they will become the change agents to enable our communities to create their own sustainable future, and Canada will be the stronger for it.

Education is an investment that pays back also because it is the main key to releasing the true potential that Indigenous Peoples have to offer not only to our own future generations, but also to Canada, and to the world. **P**

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