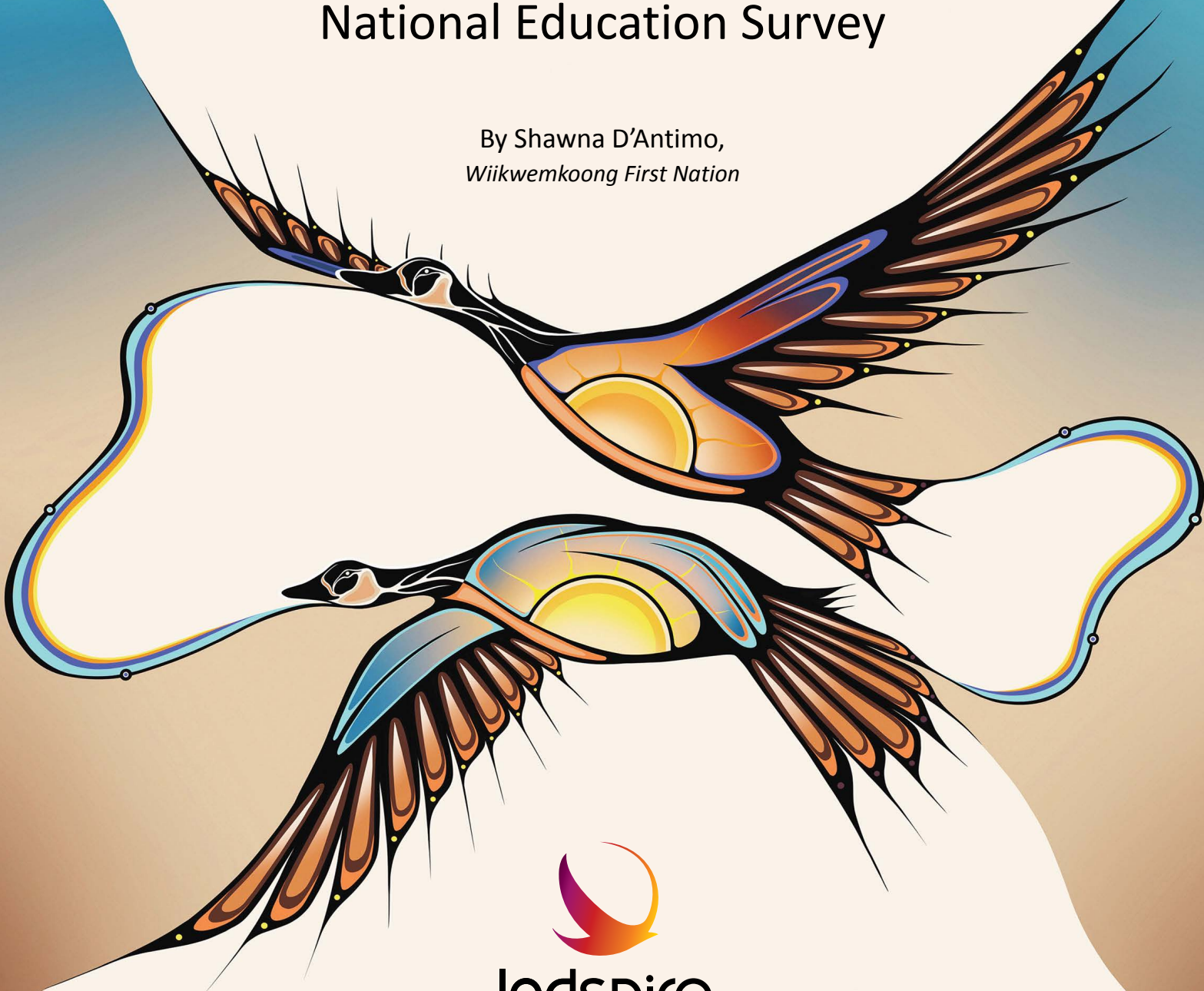


Building Brighter Futures for Indigenous Learners

Insights into the National Education Survey

By Shawna D'Antimo,
Wiikwemkoong First Nation



Indspire

Indigenous education, Canada's future. | L'éducation des autochtones, L'avenir du Canada.

Cover Design – *Dagwaagin* by Emily Kewageshig

About Indspire

Indspire is an Indigenous national registered charity that invests in the education of Indigenous people for the long-term benefit of these individuals, their families and communities, and Canada. With the support of its funding partners, Indspire disburses financial awards, delivers programs, and shares resources with the goal of improving educational outcomes for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis students. Through Indspire’s education offerings, we provide resources to students, educators, communities, and other stakeholders who are committed to improving success for Indigenous youth. In 2022–2023, Indspire awarded over \$27.5 million through 7,533 bursaries and scholarships to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis youth, making it the largest funder of Indigenous post-secondary education outside the federal government.

About the Research Knowledge Nest

The Indspire Research Knowledge Nest is the first Indigenous research program of its kind in Canada. With data analysis skills rapidly becoming critical to economic success, the Research Knowledge Nest is poised to seize this exciting opportunity to foster Indigenous engagement and leadership in quantitative research and data science roles. The program is guided by an Advisory Committee of researchers, leaders, and key stakeholders who provide direction and input on the development of this important initiative.

This report was produced through the valuable contribution of the Research Knowledge Nest’s researcher, Shawna D’Antimo, member of Wiikwemkoong First Nation.

Cover Design – *Dagwaagin* by Emily Kewageshig

Emily Kewageshig is an Anishinaabe artist and visual storyteller from Saugeen First Nation No. 29. Her work captures the interconnection of life forms using both traditional and contemporary materials. Her work is centred around themes of birth, death, and rebirth, as they are closely intertwined in both her cultural teachings and personal lived experiences. Emily celebrated her first solo exhibition titled *Mooshknemgog Bmaadziwin: Full Circle* (2020), which was shown at the Tom Thomson Art Gallery in Owen Sound, Ontario. She continues to create artwork for various organizations to highlight Indigenous knowledge and culture. She graduated from Sheridan College’s Visual and Creative Arts Diploma program with Honours in 2017, receiving the Best in Show award at the final graduate exhibition. She attended OCAD University in the BFA Indigenous Visual Culture program (2017–2020).

Founding Supporters

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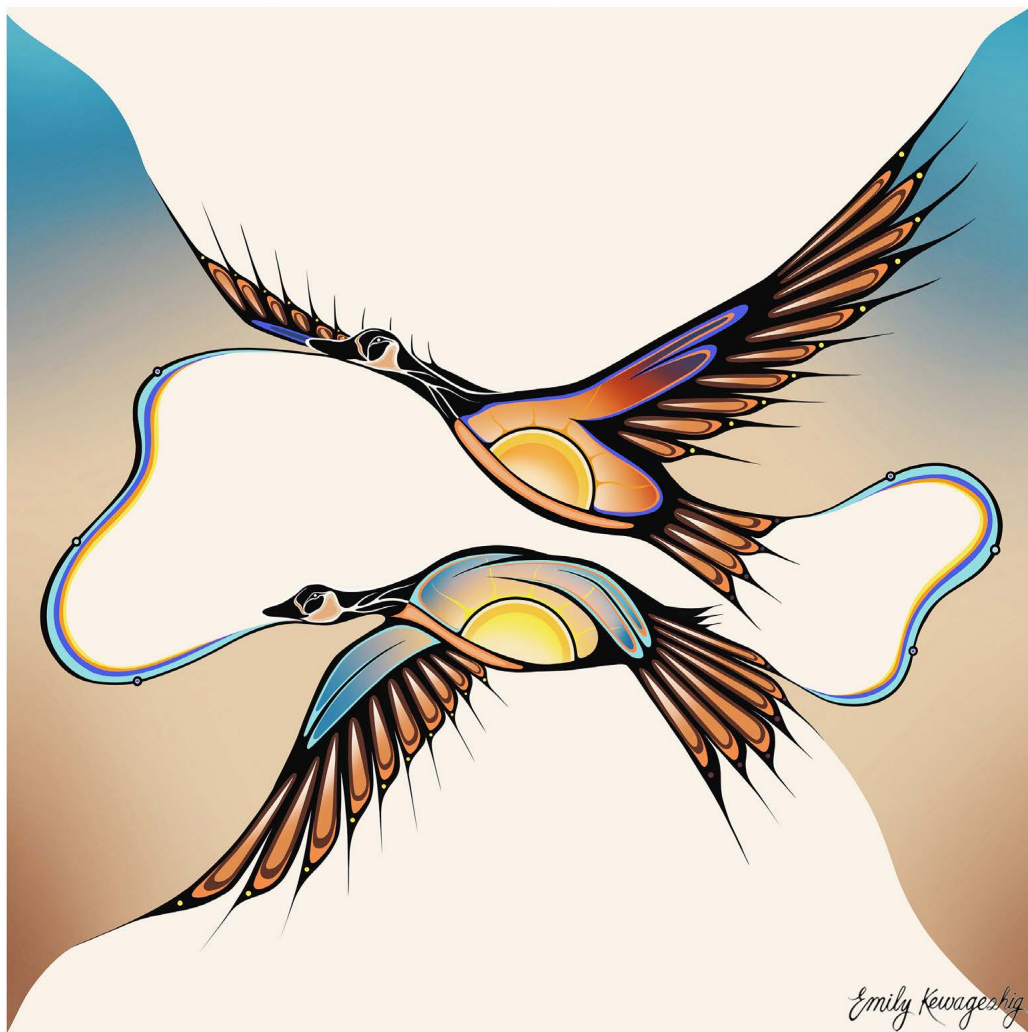
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Acknowledgments

We would like to begin by acknowledging and thanking our previous Building Brighter Futures program recipients who shared their experiences and provided valuable insight into the experiences of Indigenous students across Canada. Through the support of Indspire staff, funding partners, and other stakeholders, we are able to provide thousands of bursaries, scholarships, and awards each year to students pursuing post-secondary education and training.

At Indspire, it is important for us to provide space for Indigenous communities to feel seen, represented, and celebrated. The success experienced by Indigenous students, and the ways they use their education to demonstrate reciprocity and to give back to community, are truly inspiring and tells the story of how brighter futures can be built when we work in partnership.

Chi-Miigwetch for the hope and encouragement that you all bring.



Design shown on cover – *Dagwaagin* by Emily Kewageshig

Introduction

Background

Indspire’s National Education Survey (NES) was first launched in early 2020 to help gain a greater understanding of the experiences of Indigenous students in post-secondary education. The survey revealed key insights into the state of education and labour outcomes for students supported through Indspire’s Building Brighter Futures: Bursaries, Scholarships and Awards (BBF) program (Indspire, 2020). This led to the creation of multiple reports that shared the experiences and successes of Indigenous students in or when navigating Western education systems.

We value the voices and experiences of Indigenous students and hold a strong interest in learning how to improve support for Indigenous education and students. To continue this important work, Indspire launched a second edition of the NES in early 2023. We reached out to previous BBF recipients from 2016–2022 to learn about their post-secondary experiences, employment outcomes after graduation, and what impacts receiving financial support has had on their journey.

Purpose

The purpose of the NES is to broadly learn about Indigenous post-secondary student experiences, including the impacts of financial support on their education and employment outcomes, thereby providing greater insight and understanding into how Indigenous students can be better supported to succeed throughout their unique educational journeys.

Responses from the NES are used to promote activities that advance Indspire’s mission to support Indigenous people achieving their highest potential. This allows us to improve our program design and foster an understanding of the impacts of the BBF program. This includes providing insight and summary information to stakeholders through analysis, research reports, and presentations.

Indigenous People in Canada

According to the 2021 Census, Indigenous people in Canada represented 5.0% of the total population. This reflects a slight increase in the Indigenous population from the previous Census in 2016 and continues to surpass the growth of the non-Indigenous population. The Indigenous population is also younger than the non-Indigenous population (average age of 33.6 years compared to 41.8 years) and 65.1% of the Indigenous population is of working age (15 to 64 years). Since 2016, the Métis population has increased by 6.3% and the Indigenous population residing in urban areas has increased by 12.5% (Statistics Canada, 2021). Despite the healthy population growth of Indigenous communities, it is important to consider the impacts of colonization in terms of disparities among Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations.

Experiences of social inequalities have contributed to a lack of resources and opportunities for the education and employment advancement of Indigenous people. This is seen in the inequities that continue to exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations, for example in terms of educational attainment. Additionally, Indigenous people were more likely to live in low-income households and in housing that needs repairs or is overcrowded (Statistics Canada, 2021). Without context, interpreted statistical data can make Indigenous people appear in an inadequate or deficient way. Providing ongoing improved support for Indigenous students to pursue post-secondary education is an important area needed to close the gaps experienced in education, income, and labour market outcomes.

The Needs of Indigenous Students

Indigenous students often come from a much different place than non-Indigenous students entering post-secondary education. This presents unique experiences for Indigenous students working towards achieving higher education, while also learning to navigate the challenges within Western education systems. To facilitate understanding behind the need to provide greater support for Indigenous students, it is important to continue to critically reflect on current and historical contexts within Canada.

Prior to colonization, Indigenous people always had their own systems of education that included learning about community roles and responsibilities. Education for children and youth was presented in informal ways such as learning through observing the land, plants, animals, and their loved ones. In working together and building relationships, future generations were taught how to take care of community needs. This system of education significantly supported Indigenous communities, as they learned everything needed to sustain life on the land (Community Stories, 2022).

Imposed systems of colonization, particularly through the Indian Act and residential schools, have disrupted traditional ways of learning and have negatively shaped the experiences of Indigenous people and Indigenous communities. Consequently, these realities continue to have direct impacts that still need to be addressed. Initiatives, such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action, highlight some of the work required to rebuild healthy communities and relationships with non-Indigenous people in Canada (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

Survey Design

Research Questions

Indspire continues to ask important questions within the National Education Survey (NES) on how to better understand and support the experiences of Indigenous post-secondary students. The overarching questions in this research project included learning about BBF recipients' education and employment experiences, including during and after program completion (if applicable), and how our bursaries, scholarships, and awards have supported them in their studies. The topics covered in this survey were developed to explore:

1. Recipient award impact and outcomes
2. Educational experience and outcomes
3. Employment experience and outcomes
4. Demographics of survey respondents

Methodology

Previous successful BBF recipients were invited to share their experience through completing the NES. The online survey was administered at the end of January 2023 and used a non-probability purposive sampling method to include BBF recipients from the past six years (2016–2022). Most importantly, this approach ensured that participants had the opportunity to share their experiences and feedback. The estimated time to complete the survey was 15–20 minutes. It included a total of 50 questions (some questions/sections used a skip-logic function based on previous responses and some questions were optional).

Providing opportunities to receive feedback is important to supporting Indigenous education and gaining insights into the experiences of Indigenous post-secondary students. To create a deeper understanding of Indigenous students' experiences, we collected quantitative and qualitative data within the NES. This approach supported the telling of a more complete story. This information is intended to be used to prepare research reports and enhance the understanding of others working to improve education for Indigenous students.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the NES was analyzed using descriptive statistics and provides a summary that highlights key insights into Indigenous students' experiences in post-secondary education. It is important to note that estimates produced in this report should be considered representative of the sample only (*n*), which includes the 6,930 total participants who responded to our survey.

The NES was sent to over 19,016 BBF recipients from 2016–2022 and achieved a respondent rate of 36.4%. Of these 6,930 responses, 5,634 (81.5%) were complete responses and 1,296 (18.7%) were partial responses. Factors that impact the total respondents (*n*) within the report figures include complete/partial responses and the use of skip logic.

Ethical Considerations

All individual information shared from survey participants remains confidential to Indspire. Only aggregate and summary data will be shared externally. This is important, as it allowed students supported through Indspire to be honest in their responses and have a safe platform to share their experiences and voices. Participants were assured that responses to the NES would not affect any decisions on future applications made to Indspire's BBF program. They were also informed that, by voluntarily participating in the survey, they gave Indspire consent to use their responses in producing relevant research for the benefit of Indigenous students. More information on how we use participant data at Indspire can be found in our [privacy policy](#).

Key Insights from Indigenous Students

Recipient Award Impact and Outcomes

This section provides strong evidence of the positive impacts of receiving financial support from the BBF program. Access to financial support is a large barrier to post-secondary education for Indigenous students, with 73% of respondents indicating it was critical to completing their studies. We also see that 90% of respondents indicated that receiving financial support positively impacted their studies (Figure 1.1).

The NES looked to provide insights into the impacts of receiving a BBF award. We learned that close to two-thirds of respondents either strongly agreed (45%) or agreed (28%) that without this financial support, they could not have completed their studies. In addition, 90% of respondents strongly agreed (55%) or agreed (35%) that financial support allowed them to spend more time focused on their studies (Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1: Impacts of Building Brighter Futures Award

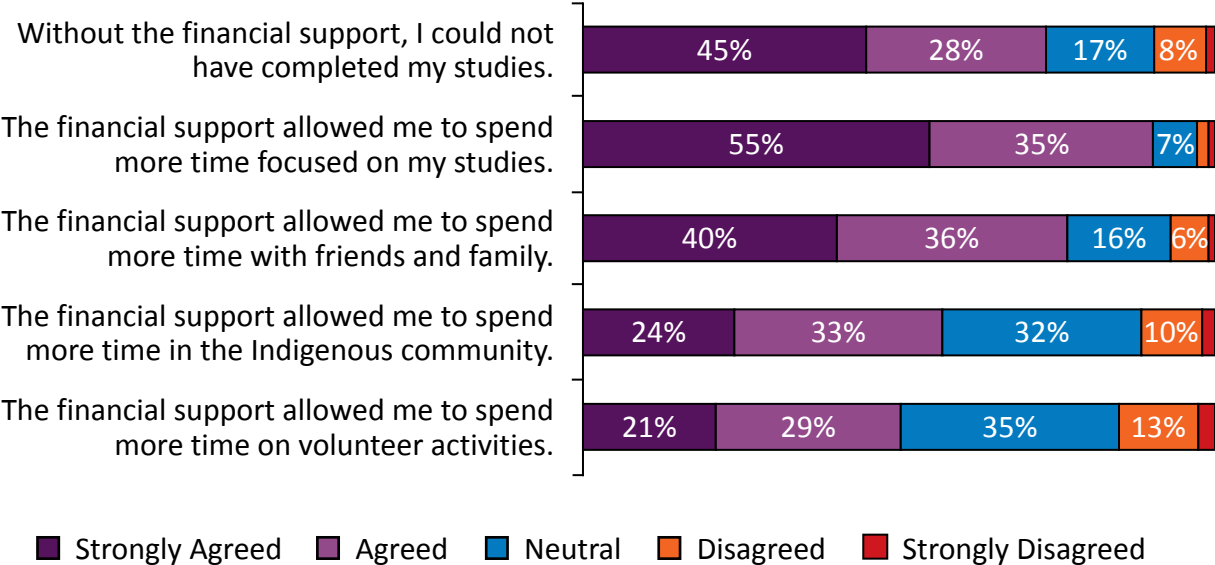


Figure 1.1 proportions calculated based on total respondents, n=5,663.
 *3% or less is not labelled.

“I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for the support provided by generous donors. Coming from my reserve, opportunities seemed finite. Further education truly opened doors to opportunities and Indspire assisted throughout, I just couldn’t have done it without them.”

This demonstrates that BBF funding provides students crucial opportunities and the ability to thrive in their studies. Through observing recipients' grade point average (GPA), we learned the majority of respondents are high achievers and are successful in their studies. We see that nearly half (47%) of recipients reported a GPA of an "A" or 80–100%, and 42% reported a GPA of a "B" or 70–79% (Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2: Program Grade Point Average (GPA)

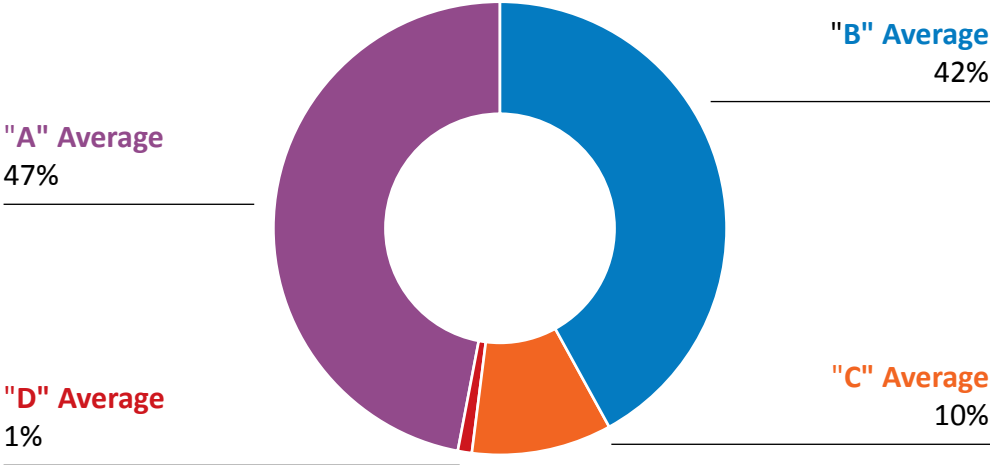


Figure 1.2 proportions calculated based on total respondents, n=5,828.

"A tremendous amount of stress was taken off my back with the support of Indspire. I was able to focus on my studies and able to travel home to see my family. It truly changed the course of my path to be a recipient of this grant."

To learn more about how Indigenous students fund their post-secondary education, we asked recipients about the sources of funding that supported their studies. We see that scholarships, awards, or fellowships (63%) was a top source, followed by First Nation, band, or treaty funding (58%). Additional sources to fund their education (Figure 1.3) included government-sponsored student loans (44%), personal savings (43%), government grants or bursaries (41%), and employment earnings (41%).

Figure 1.3: Sources Used to Fund Post-Secondary Education

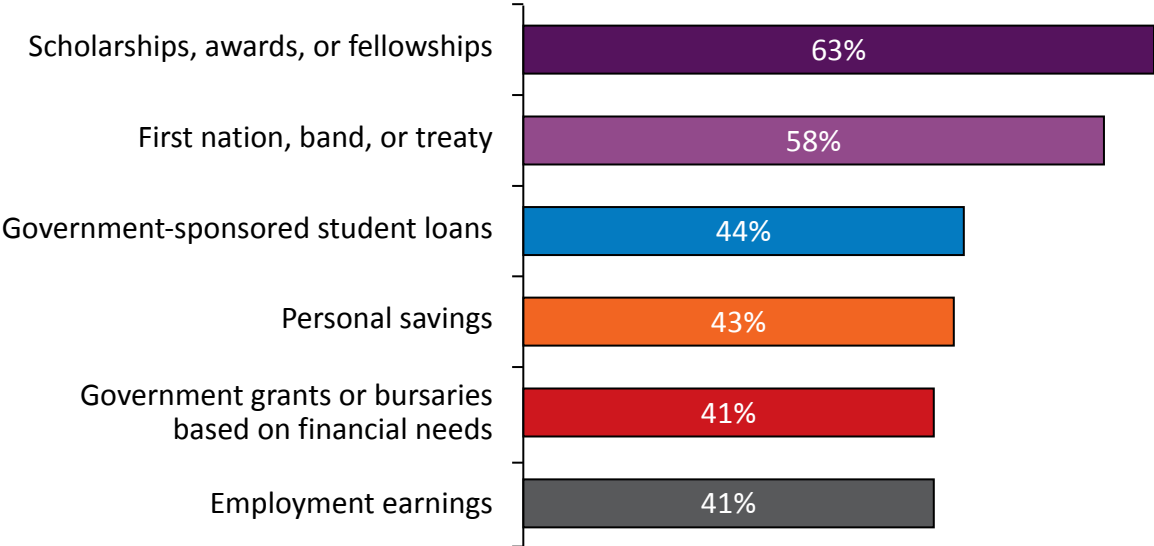


Figure 1.3 proportions calculated based on total respondents, n=6,046.

“I was not funded by my band. So, the bursary helped me with priority expenses such as bills, rent, and groceries, as well as towards purchasing materials needed to make my time in my course successful.”

To gain insight into the educational achievements of recipients, they were asked about funded program completion. We learned that 89% of respondents indicated that they completed their programs. In addition, 8% of respondents reported they deferred program completion and 3% did not complete their programs. Recipients who were currently progressing in their programs, or switched to different programs, were excluded from this calculation (Figure 1.4).

Figure 1.4: Program Completion for Award Recipients

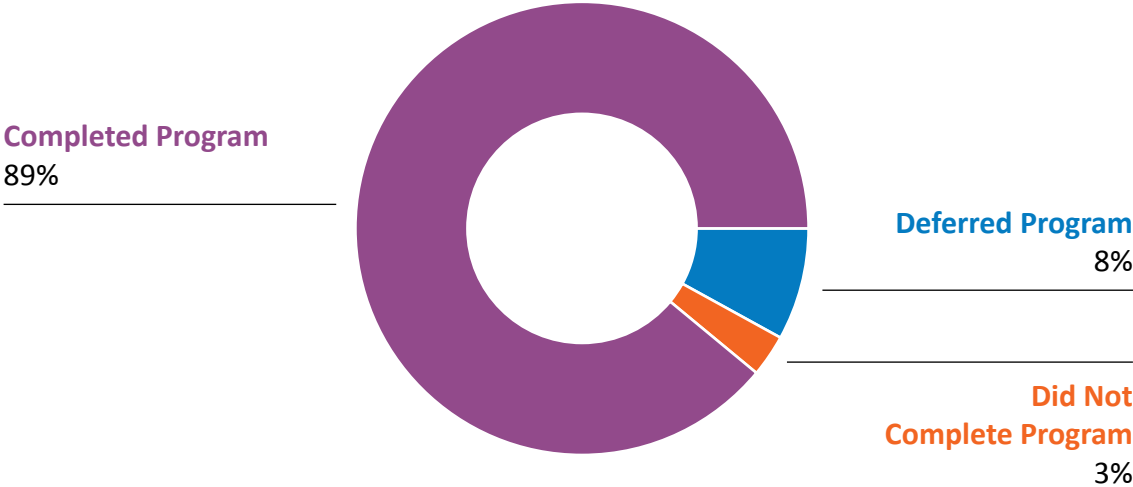


Figure 1.4 proportions calculated based on total respondents, n=3,318.

“It allowed me to complete my studies. Without it, I would not have financially been able to complete my program due to lack of funds. I was unable to work, go to school, and care for my two children being a single parent. With these funds, it allowed me to accomplish my dream to finish my education and better myself to provide a better opportunity for both of my children.”

Educational Experience and Outcomes

This section highlights the experiences of BBF recipients during their post-secondary education. It is evident that attending post-secondary education introduces multiple challenges for Indigenous students completing their studies. Respondents indicated that the top challenges they experienced (Figure 2.1) were financial constraints (70%), stress of meeting obligations (73%), and mental health impacts (69%).

The NES looked to provide insights into the challenges Indigenous students experience throughout post-secondary education. We learned that more than two thirds of the respondents indicated they strongly agreed (32%) or agreed (38%) that financial constraints have been a challenge to their education. In addition, over two thirds of respondents strongly agreed (30%) or agreed (43%) that the stress of meeting their obligations was a challenge to their education (Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1: Challenges to Post-Secondary Education

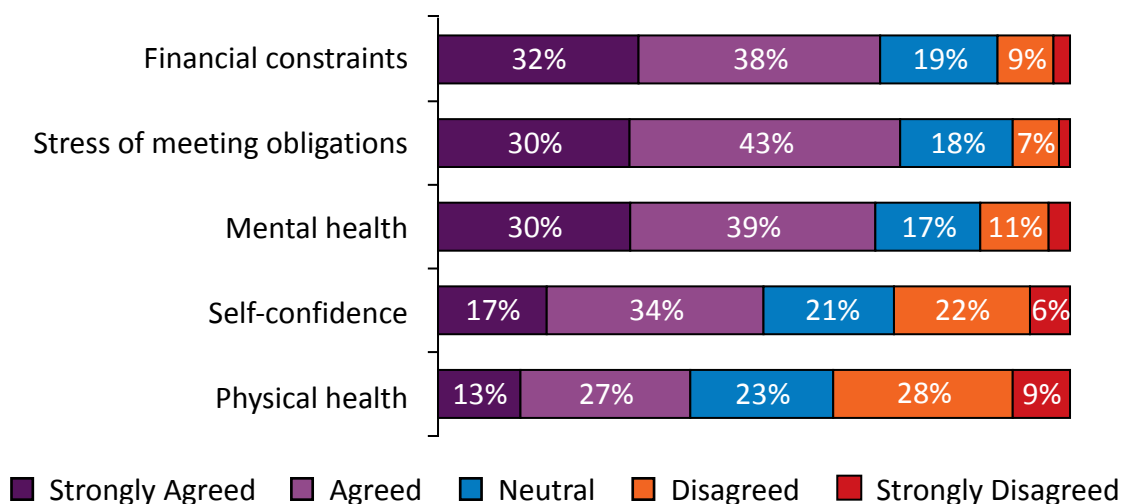


Figure 2.1 proportions calculated based on total respondents, n=5,781.

*3% or less is not labelled.

“Leaving home and moving to the city to get an education is a bit of a culture shock and creates a huge toll on my mental health, which then leads to a toll on physical health and self-confidence. More resources are needed to help Indigenous students that leave their homes for school.”

“I would say it is more the reverse, my education challenged my mental health, challenged my relationships, and challenged my self-confidence.”

Again, we see that finances are a barrier for Indigenous students and learned the majority of respondents needed to work while studying. For those who worked during their studies, 86% responded their reason for working was to earn income to cover necessary expenses such as food. Close to half of respondents worked to cover educational expenses (47%) and to allow for optional expenditures (45%). In addition, a third of respondents worked to gain work experience related to their field of study (33%) and to earn income to support their family/children (31%) during their studies (Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2: Top Reasons for Working While Studying

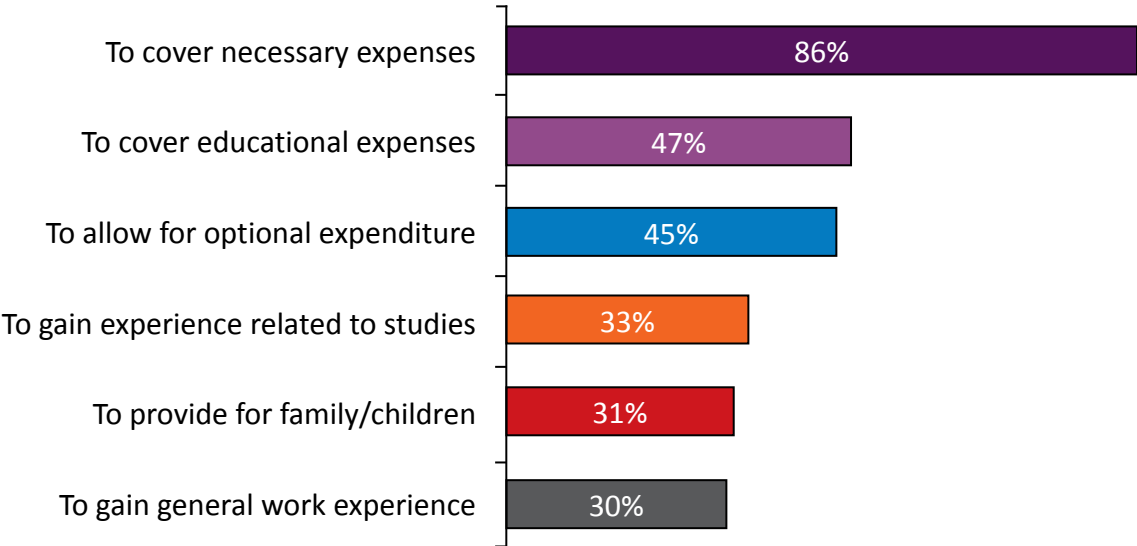


Figure 2.2 proportions calculated based on total respondents, n=3,836.

“Meeting financial needs has been a cause of stress with the rising cost of living. Relying on scholarships and bursaries puts an uncertainty of ‘I am okay this year, but will I be next year?’”

To further understand students' experiences, we looked at employment rates and hours of work per week. Through the NES, we learned that 64% of respondents indicated that they worked an average of 20 hours per week during their studies. In general, we see that average hours worked per week increases by age group, while the proportion of respondents who worked slightly decreases by age group (Figure 2.3).

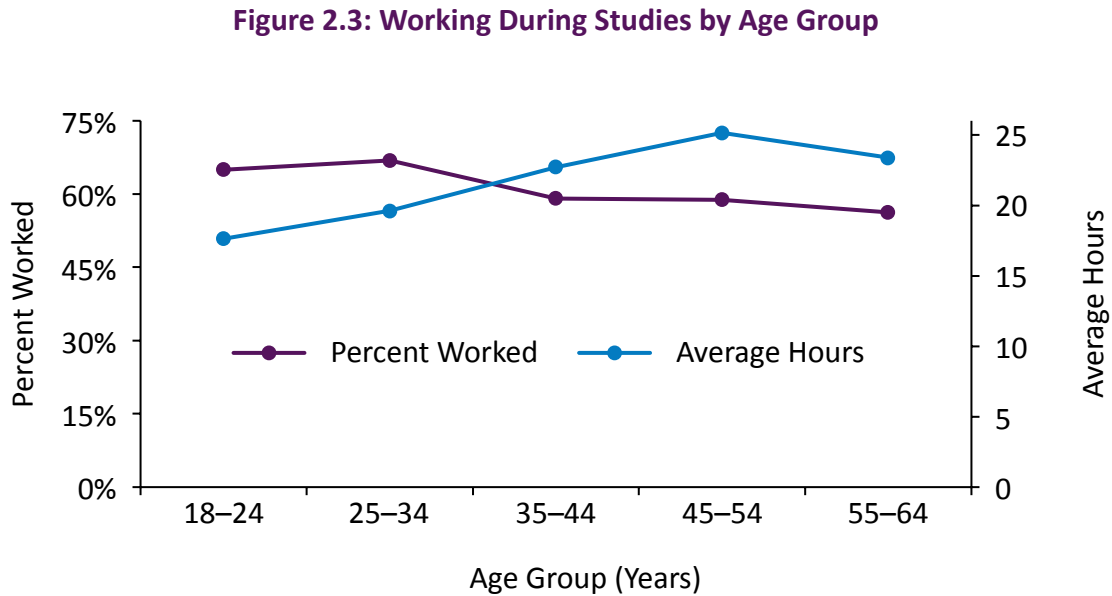


Figure 2.3 proportions calculated based on total respondents, $n=3,669$.

“I was able to take a lot of financial stress off my back for food and living expenses, which made it easier for me to say ‘yes’ to going to events and educational workshops that have really helped me grow as a student and professionally.”

We looked at the highest level of education completed for BBF recipients who responded to the NES. This was compared with Statistics Canada data from the 2021 Census, comparing Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. We see that 31% of respondents hold a bachelor’s degree, compared to 9% of the Indigenous population and 22% of the non-Indigenous population. Additionally, 16% of respondents hold a university degree above the bachelor’s level, compared to 3% of the Indigenous population and 12% of the non-Indigenous population. Similar proportions are found between populations for those who hold a college certificate or diploma (Figure 2.4).

Figure 2.4: Highest Level of Education Comparison

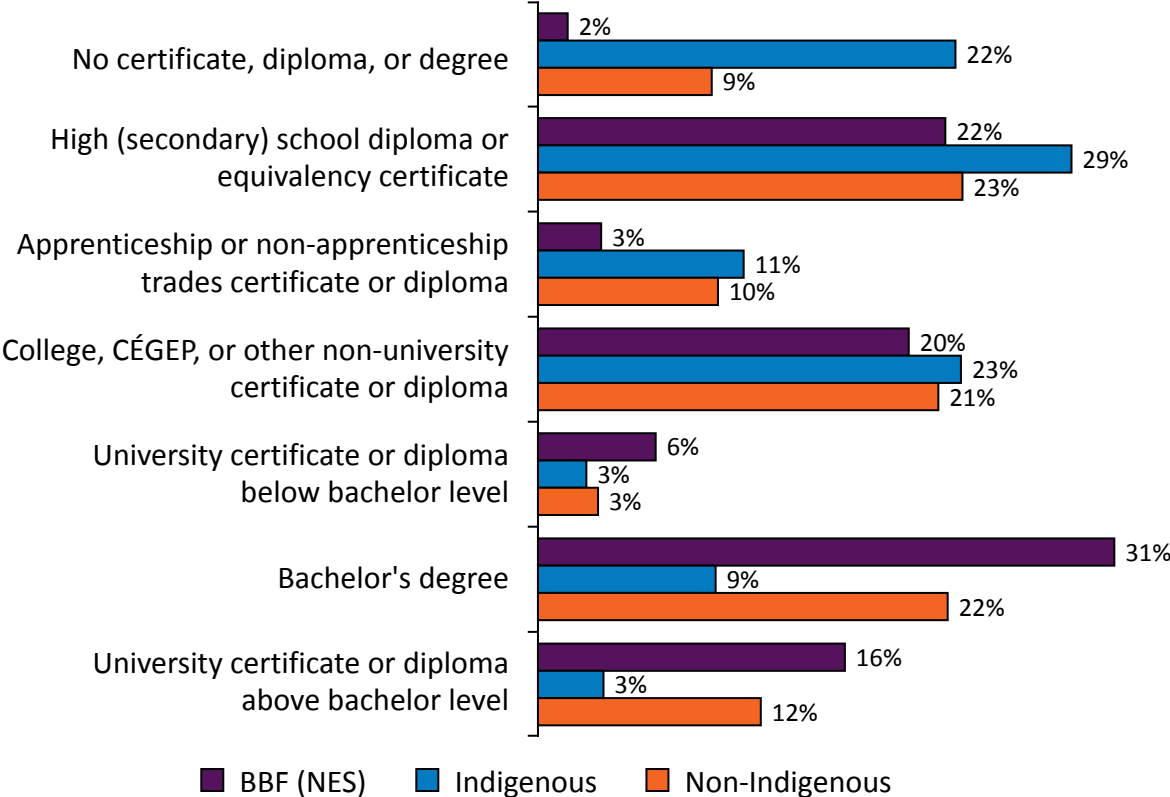


Figure 2.4 contrasts BBF (NES) and Statistics Canada data (Table 98-10-0414-01). BBF (NES) proportions calculated based on total respondents, n=5,928. StatCan Census proportions, Indigenous n=890,790, non-Indigenous, n=18,677,475.

“I am a mature student and therefore ineligible for many bursaries. Financial support from the BBF bursary has contributed to the ability to participate in post-secondary education.”

“I felt appreciated and a part of the Indigenous community. The funds stabilized me between degrees. The funds paid my rent between degrees as it gave me confidence to continue.”

Employment Experience and Outcomes

This section focuses on the employment experiences of recipients who have graduated from their program. We see clear evidence that recipients are finding relevant employment, with 84% of respondents reporting that they work in roles related to their education. We also see that respondents felt their education was relevant, with 83% reporting it prepared them for employment. In addition, we learned that 72% indicated that their work impacts the Indigenous community (Figure 3.1).

We learned that over half (52%) of respondents strongly agreed, and nearly a third (32%) agreed, that they are employed in a role that makes use of their education. Furthermore, over a third (35%) of respondents strongly agreed, and nearly half (48%) agreed, that their education prepared them for the job market. In addition, over a third (38%) of respondents strongly agreed, and nearly half (44%) agreed, that they feel respected and valued by colleagues at their workplace. In addition, over a third (38%) of respondents strongly agreed, and nearly half (44%) agreed, that they feel respected and valued by colleagues at their workplace (Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1: Employment Satisfaction for Graduates

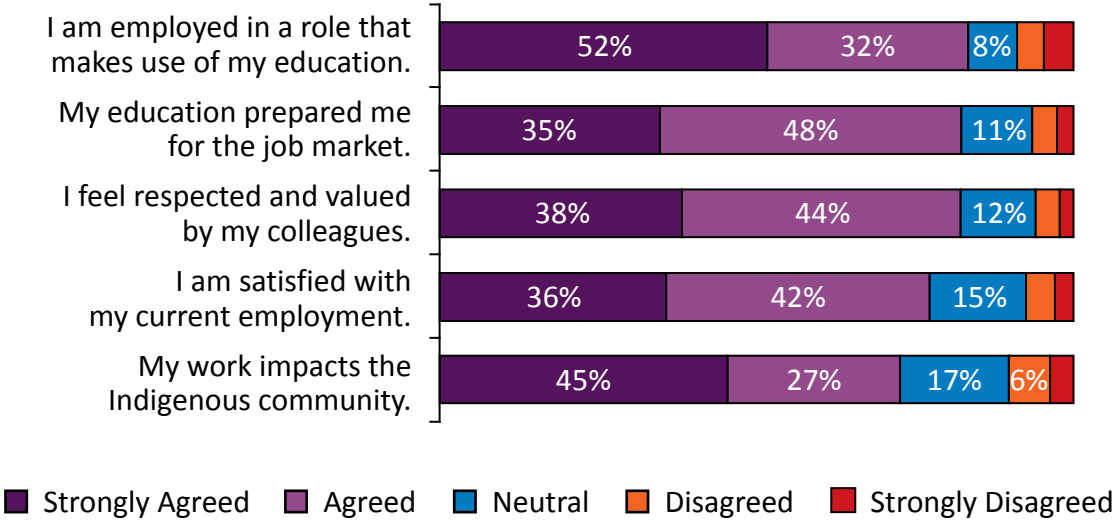


Figure 3.1 proportions calculated based on total respondents, n=2,477. *5% or less is not labelled.

“I work as an Aboriginal Education Worker with the school district. The skills and tools I learned in post secondary are utilized daily as I interact and help the Indigenous students academically, culturally, mentally, and emotionally.”

Through the NES, we learned that 88% of respondents who graduated indicated that they are employed. This included 78% full-time (over 30 hours per week) and 10% part-time (under 30 hours per week). In addition, 7% of unemployed respondents reported they were looking for employment and 5% were not looking for employment or not in the labour force (Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2: Labour Force Status for Graduates



Figure 3.2 proportions calculated based on total respondents, n=2,865.

“Having worked outside my community and gained further experience, it has set me up to achieve opportunities of growth that I can bring back to my community.”

“I am so honoured to be in a role leading business and Indigenous reconciliation and partnerships in our community and fostering inclusiveness and growth in relations.”

Not only are students finding employment related to their education, many are finding work before, or directly after, completing their program. Remarkably, we see that nearly half (49%) of graduated respondents were able to secure relevant employment immediately after graduation and a third (33%) found employment 1–4 months after graduation (Figure 3.3).

Figure 3.3: Length of Time to Find Employment After Graduation

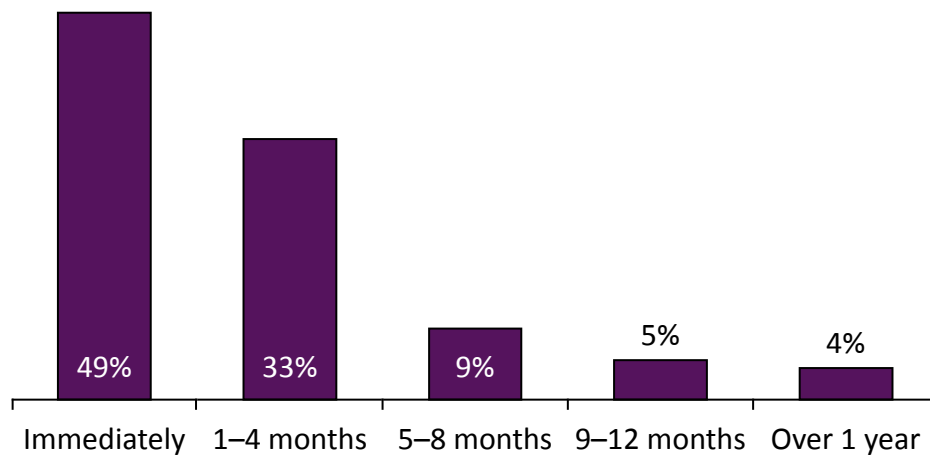


Figure 3.3 proportions calculated based on total respondents, n=2,258.

“I landed a job with my education right after I completed the education program, which was great!”

“I now work in the field of Indigenous economic development and in the promotion of Indigenous economic participation.”

As previously indicated, Indigenous students are finding work that is meaningful to them and their communities. To build on this, we learned that over a third (35%) of respondents work for Indigenous-owned businesses, community organizations, or Indigenous government. Although nearly two thirds (65%) of respondents work for non-Indigenous employers, we still see that the presence of Indigenous students who have graduated has a positive impact on themselves and their communities (Figure 3.4).

Figure 3.4: Graduates with Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Employers



Figure 4.4 proportions calculated based on total respondents, n=2,408.

“Becoming a lawyer as an Indigenous student and starting my own practice to be able to serve my community in the field of business law has been the most rewarding accomplishment of my life. This bursary was critical to me when I was in school and I am so thankful that you made my education possible.”

Conclusion

Importance

Supporting the future generations of Indigenous learners is not only important for Indigenous people and communities, but for Canada as a whole. Since the Indigenous population on average is younger and growing at a higher rate than the non-Indigenous population, it is evident that Indigenous people hold a key role in addressing the needs of Canada's labour market (Centre for the Study of Living Standards, 2023). This is especially important to consider as we face a large growing aging population in Canada.

With this in mind, we see that BBF recipients are reaching higher levels of education than the Indigenous population shown in the 2021 Census (Figure 2.4). This educational attainment has led BBF recipients to more meaningfully participate in the labour market and contribute to economic development in their communities. This means investing in the education and futures of Indigenous learners is a critical opportunity for meeting the growing needs of the labour market.

Recommendations

Through this report, we see that receiving financial support is a key element for Indigenous students' success in post-secondary and into employment. For many, this support provides an opportunity that is life changing—not only for the students themselves, but also for their communities. In 2022–2023, Indspire could only meet 29% of Indigenous students' financial needs. With limited funding available to meet student requirements, there is a clear demand for increased funding and support.

In addition, financial support needs to be more sustainable throughout students' studies, which are typically four years in length. Students who shared their experiences, expressed how large of an impact receiving an award has had on their futures, families, and communities. It has allowed them to succeed in striving toward a brighter future and meaningful careers. With the support of partnerships and working in collaboration, we can act together to meet the needs of Indigenous learners and Canada's labour market.

Further Research

At Indspire, understanding the experiences of Indigenous students is necessary for identifying the work needed to improve support for Indigenous education. As we can see, improving educational outcomes by providing more relevant support for Indigenous students is a key step towards socioeconomic improvement and advancement for Indigenous people in Canada. This remains an important area of study for closing the educational, employment, and income gaps among Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations.

This report serves as an introduction and overview into key insights from the 2023 National Education Survey (NES). There are further opportunities to conduct quantitative analysis and examine comparisons between BBF recipient characteristics. This will provide added value and opportunity to give greater insights into the voices of Indigenous students and their identified needs.

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Appendix

Demographics of Survey Respondents

In terms of geographic distribution of NES participants' province of residence, we see that over a quarter (27%) of respondents are from Ontario and 20% are from Alberta. In addition, 18% of respondents are from British Columbia and 12% are from Saskatchewan (Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1: Geographic Distribution

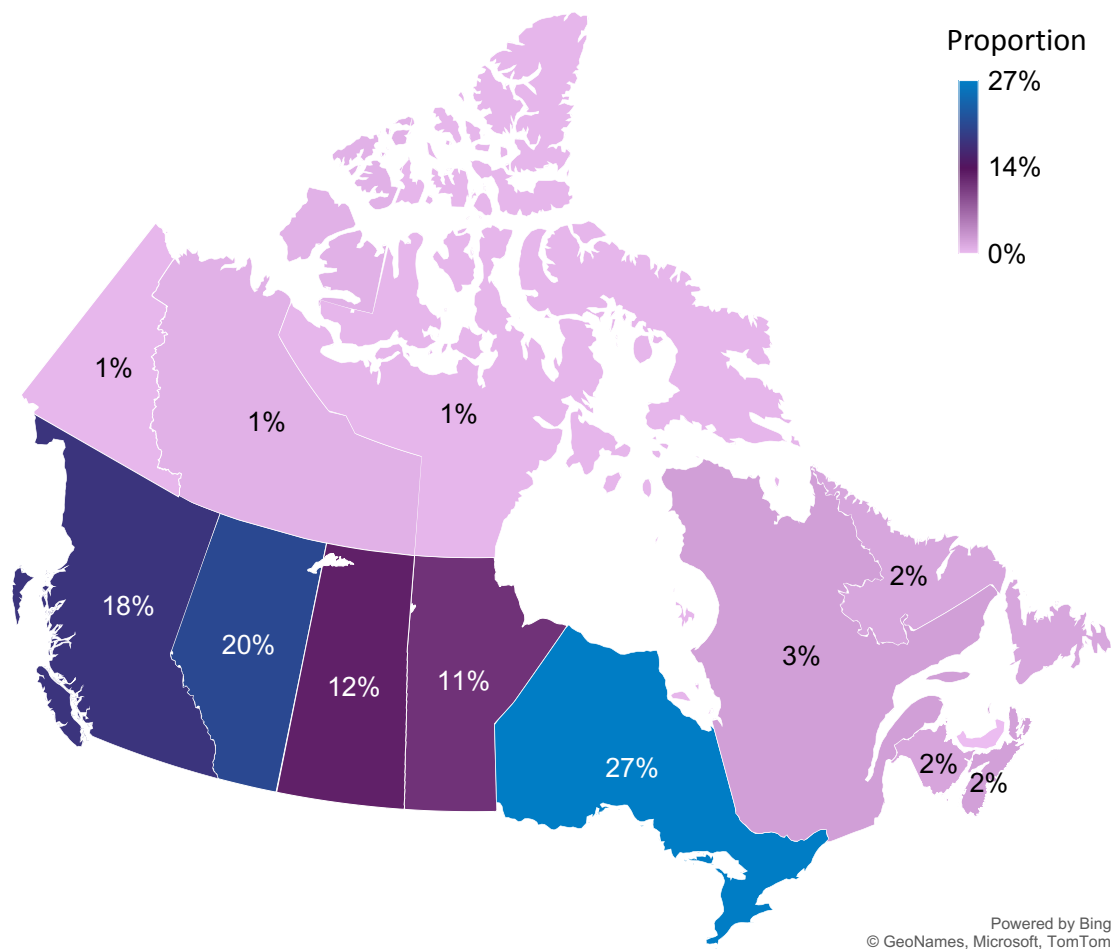


Figure 4.1 proportions calculated based on total respondents, n=5,676.

In looking at the level of study for NES participants, we see that over a half (52%) of respondents are, or were, enrolled in a bachelor's degree program and 17% are, or were, enrolled in a college certificate or diploma program. In addition, 14% of respondents are, or were, enrolled in a master's degree program or above (Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2: Level of Study

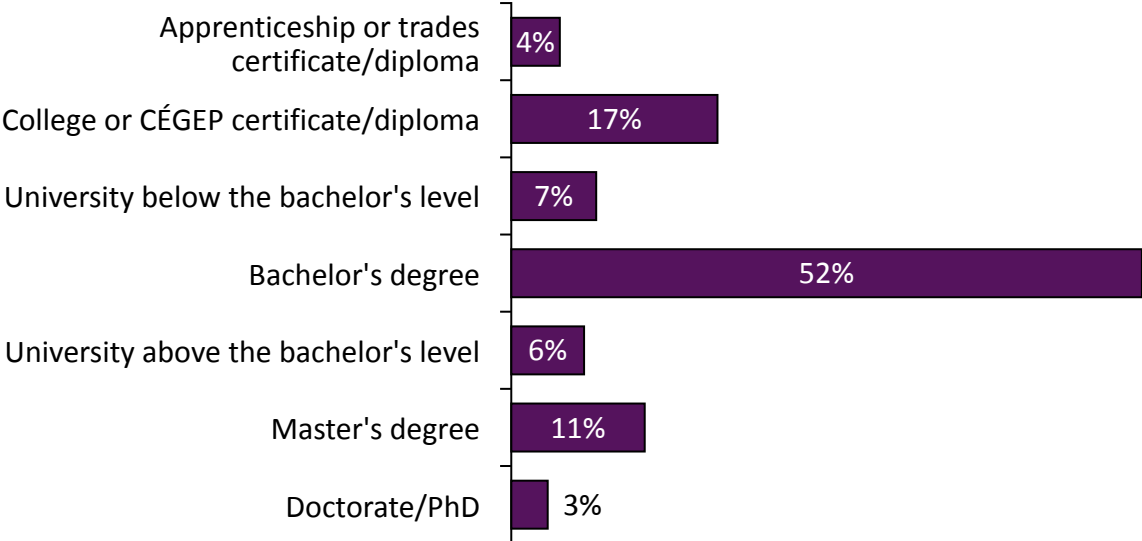


Figure 4.2 proportions calculated based on total respondents, n=6,106.

In terms of Indigenous identity of NES participants, we see that 69% of respondents are First Nation, 28% are Métis, and 3% are Inuit. Although the majority of First Nation BBF recipients are status, separation between status and non-status was not specifically included in the survey (Figure 4.3).

Figure 4.3: Indigenous Identity

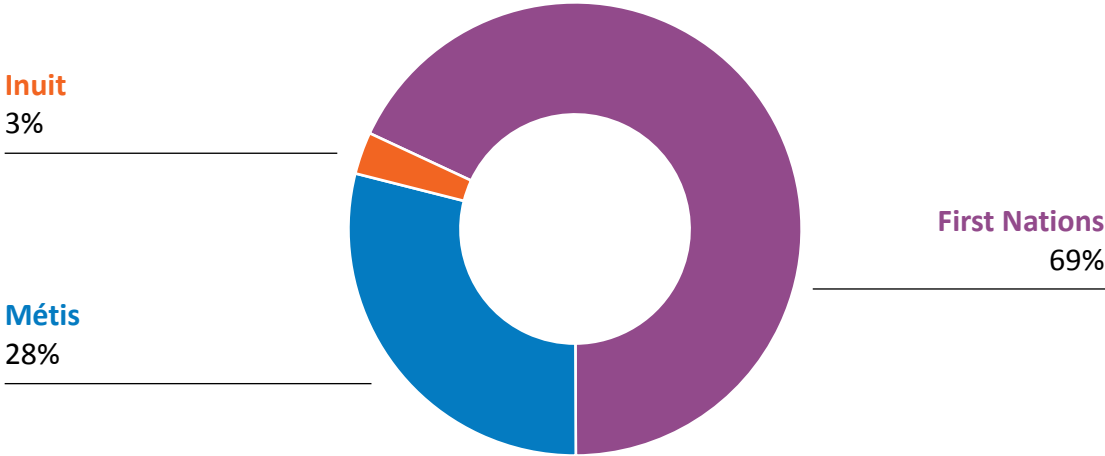


Figure 4.3 proportions calculated based on total respondents, n=5,745.

In looking at the ages of NES participants, we see that 46% of respondents are between 25 and 34 years old, and 27% are between 18 and 24 years old. In addition, 17% are between 35 and 44 years old, 7% are between 45 and 54 years old, and 3% are between 55 and 64 years old. (Figure 4.4).

Figure 4.4: Age Category (Years)

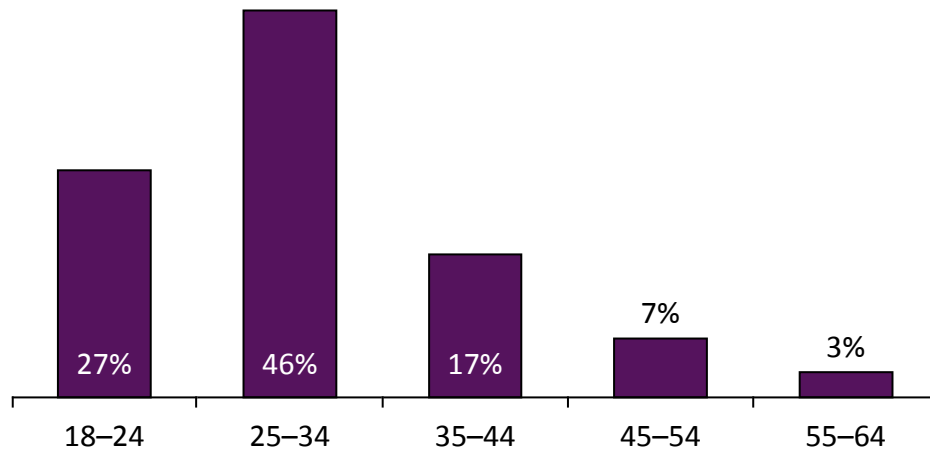


Figure 4.4 proportions calculated based on total respondents, n=5,733.

In terms of educational program progress of NES participants, we see that 48% of respondents completed their program and 44% are working towards completion. In addition, 4% deferred program completion, 2% switched to a different program, and 2% did not complete their program (Figure 4.5).

Figure 4.5: Program Progress

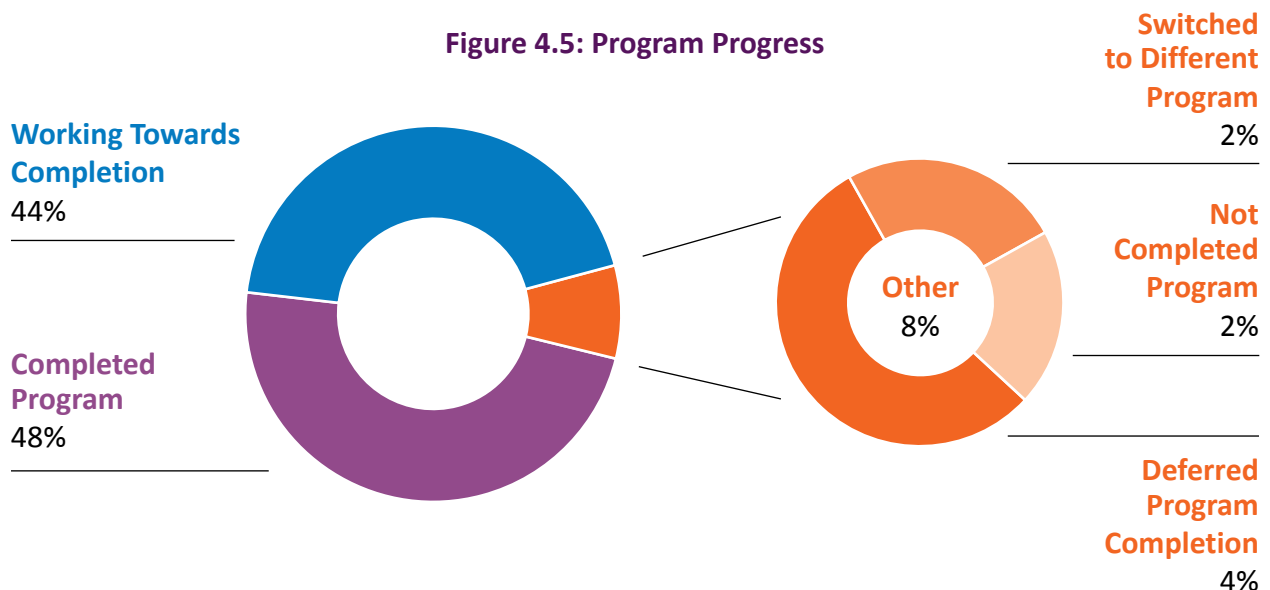


Figure 4.5 proportions calculated based on total respondents, n=6,165.

In looking at the educational attainment of recipients, we see that over half (59%) of respondents hold a high school diploma or equivalency, and over a third (39%) hold a bachelor's degree. In addition, over a quarter (27%) hold a college certificate or diploma, and 18% hold a university degree above the bachelor's level (Figure 4.6).

Figure 4.6: Levels of Education Completed

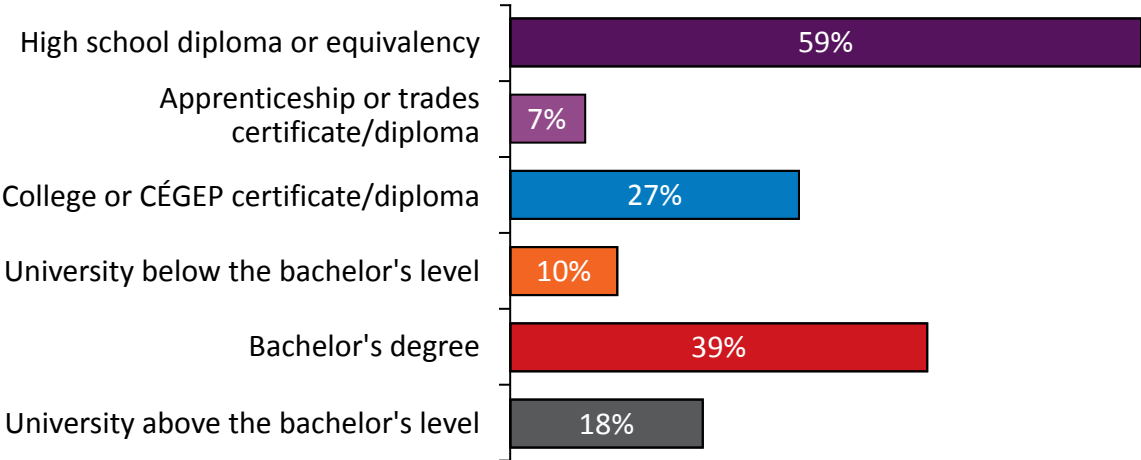


Figure 4.6 proportions calculated based on total respondents, n=5,928.



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