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

Understanding the Experience of Indigenous Students Transitioning to the Labour Market

2025 | MAHZAR, A., NORRIS, D., AYSON, G., & DEHGHANSAI, N.

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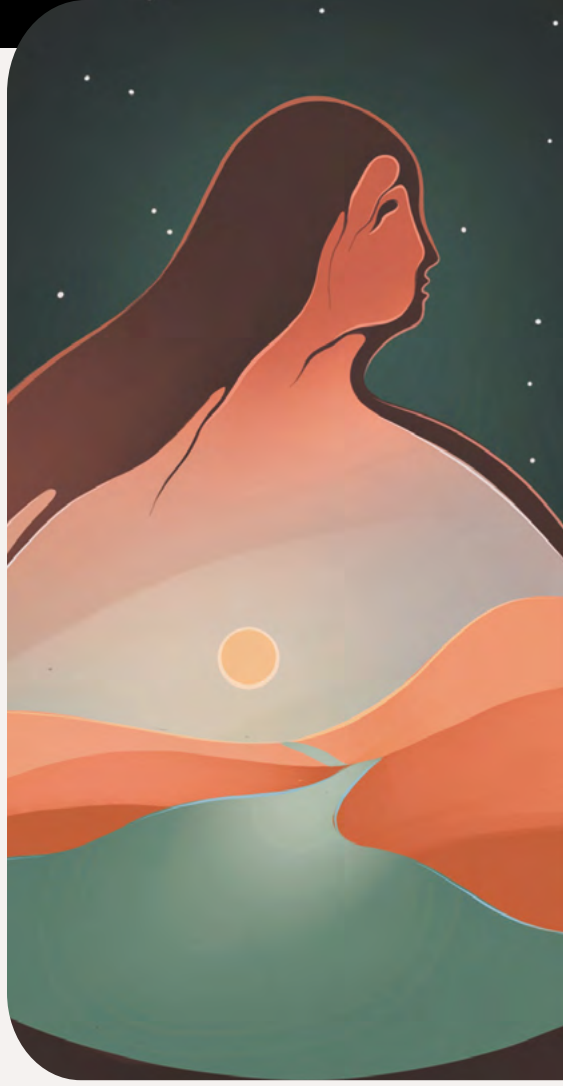


COVER DESIGN—*AKI EARTH* BY LUKE SWINSON

Luke Swinson is an illustrator and muralist based in Kitchener, Ontario, whose work is rooted in his Indigenous heritage as a member of the Mississaugas of Scugog Island First Nation. With a focus on cultural education and preservation, Luke's art serves as a personal exploration and reclamation of his heritage. Through his vibrant, thought-provoking pieces, he hopes to inspire younger generations to connect with their roots and the natural world.

FOREWORD FOR RESEARCH & IMPACT'S EDUCATION AND LABOUR MARKET REPORTS SERIES

For First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples across Canada, access to equitable, culturally relevant education has always been fundamental to achieving individual and collective goals. Yet, while many Indigenous learners continue to demonstrate resilience and academic excellence, persistent systemic barriers hinder full participation in post-secondary education and meaningful employment. Addressing these challenges requires not only commitment but also evidence: a thoughtful collection and examination of data that centres Indigenous experiences and informs responsive, effective policy.

With that goal in mind, Indspire is proud to present the *Education and Labour Market Series*, a collection of six interrelated research reports developed by Indspire's Research & Impact (R&I) team and supported by the Employment and Social Development Canada's (ESDC) *Skills and Partnership Fund*. This series offers a comprehensive look at the current state of Indigenous post-secondary education and labour market outcomes across the country. As Statistics Canada's *2021 Census* made plain, Indigenous young people are the fastest-growing demographic in the country. It is essential that they are supported throughout their educational journeys—and, ultimately, to successfully enter their chosen careers after graduation.

Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data, including five years of *Building Brighter Futures: Bursaries & Scholarships* (BBF) recipient information and feedback from Indigenous graduates and employers, these reports illuminate critical trends, challenges, and opportunities. They reveal growing post-secondary enrolment, especially among Indigenous women, and underscore the strong employment outcomes of BBF recipients. They also point to ongoing disparities in access to funding and the need for more culturally informed support during the transition to employment.

What distinguishes this research is its grounding in Indigenous perspectives. National data often fails to reflect the lived experiences of Indigenous learners or to capture the complexities of their educational and career journeys. By centring Indigenous voices and producing Indigenous-led analysis, this series begins to fill a long-standing research gap, beginning the essential work of building programs and policies that truly support Indigenous success.

As Indspire continues to advocate for systemic change, the insights in this series will serve as a guidepost. They will inform the development of a forthcoming position statement that synthesizes key findings and recommendations, offering a sustainable strategic path forward. We hope this research will spark conversation, guide collaboration, and inspire meaningful action at multiple levels by a wide circle of stakeholders.

Dr. Mike DeGagné, Ph.D.
President and CEO,
Indspire

INDSPIRE'S EDUCATION AND LABOUR MARKET RESEARCH PROGRAM: TRENDS AMONG INDIGENOUS LEARNERS IN CANADA

Education and Labour Market Series

This series of six interrelated research reports explores the evolving landscape of post-secondary education and labour market transitions for Indigenous learners in Canada. Developed by Indspire's Research and Impact department, these studies aim to inform program design, donor engagement, and policy advocacy to better support First Nations, Inuit, and Métis learners.

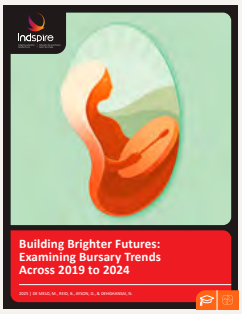
Despite progress in Indigenous educational attainment, significant gaps remain in access, persistence, and equitable transition into the labour market. There is limited national research that integrates Indigenous student experiences with labour market outcomes—creating a need for Indigenous-led, data-informed studies. This research program helps fill that gap and is supported by the Government of Canada's Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) through the Skills and Partnership Fund.

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

State of Indigenous Education and Labour Market

Research and Impact, 2025

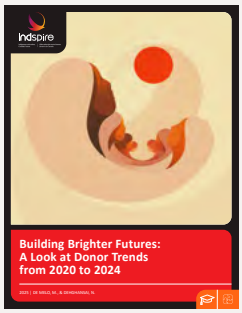
Providing a national overview of Indigenous student enrollment, educational attainment, and labour market integration, this report identifies key disparities in post-secondary access, highlights growth in enrollment—particularly among women—and demonstrates how Indspire's Building Brighter Futures (BBF) recipients mirror broader student trends while supporting alignment with in-demand careers, especially in healthcare.



Building Brighter Futures: Examining Bursary Trends Across 2019–2024

De Melo et al., 2025

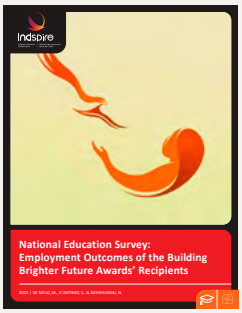
Analyzing five years of BBF recipient data, along with showing substantial growth in both participation (+63%) and funding disbursement (+74%), this report explores recipient demographics, fields of study, and financial need, finding a concentration in BHASE programs and persistent gaps between funding levels and student needs, especially in health-related fields.



Building Brighter Futures: A Look at Donor Trends from 2020–2024

De Melo & Dehghansai, 2025

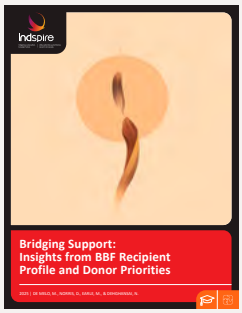
Examining donor funding patterns and priorities, this report reveals an increase in donor engagement and highlights alignment (and misalignment) between donor preferences and student demand. While most donors do not restrict funding based on gender or Indigenous identity, significant program-specific preferences exist, particularly favouring STEM fields over more commonly chosen BHASE disciplines.



National Education Survey: Employment Outcomes of Building Brighter Future Awards' Recipients

De Melo et al., 2025

Based on survey data from BBF recipients (2016–2022), this report highlights strong post-graduation employment outcomes. Among graduates, 88% were employed (78% full-time), with many securing work in their field within six months. Respondents reported high satisfaction with job relevance and growth potential, reinforcing the long-term value of BBF support.



Bridging Support: Insights from BBF Recipient Profile and Donor Priorities

De Melo et al., 2025

This comparative study bridges data from two BBF reports (*Examining Bursary Trends Across 2019–2024* and *A Look at Donor Trends from 2020–2024*) to assess how well donor support aligns with student needs. The analysis uncovers gaps in program alignment—most notably, the underfunding of health, education, and social sciences—and recommends strategies to better match donor investments with recipient goals.

Understanding the Experience of Indigenous Students Transitioning into the Labour Market

Mazhar et al., 2025

A qualitative study capturing perspectives from Indigenous graduates and employers, this report explores challenges faced by students transitioning from education to employment, including workplace adjustments and (lack of) culturally responsive support, and recommends improved experiential learning and targeted hiring practices.

Looking Ahead

Indspire is in the process of developing a position statement that will consolidate key insights and recommendations from across all six reports. It will serve as a strategic tool to guide Indspire's partnerships, advocacy, and program development in support of Indigenous post-secondary success.

ABOUT INDSPIRE

Indspire is an Indigenous national registered charity that invests in the education of Indigenous People for the long-term benefit of students, their families and communities, and Canada. With the support of its funding partners, Indspire disburses financial awards, delivers programming, and provides resources with the goal of improving educational outcomes for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis students. Indspire provides resources to students, educators, communities, and other stakeholders who are committed to improving success in education for Indigenous youth. Since 2019, Indspire has awarded over $120 million through over 33,800 bursaries and scholarships to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis youth, making it the largest funder of Indigenous post-secondary education outside of the Canadian federal government.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to begin by acknowledging and thanking our *Building Brighter Futures* program recipients who shared their experiences with us and provided valuable insight into the experiences of Indigenous students across Canada. We also wish to acknowledge Indspire's staff, funding partners, and other stakeholders, whose support has enabled us 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 in giving back to their communities, are truly inspiring and tell the story of how brighter futures can be built when we work in partnership.

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

RESEARCH SPONSORS

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INTRODUCTION

Background

From 2006 to 2016, Canada's Indigenous population grew by 42.5%, four times the rate of non-Indigenous peoples (Statistics Canada, 2017). From 2016 to 2021, the Indigenous population in Canada grew by 9.5%, almost twice the rate of non-Indigenous peoples, and the population living in large urban areas rose by 12.5% during this same period (Statistics Canada, 2023). Additionally, educational attainment among Indigenous Peoples has seen significant progress. For example, the number of Indigenous Peoples who had completed post-secondary education (PSE) grew from 40.0% in 2016 to 49.2% in 2021 (Melvin, 2023). Those living closer to urban areas tended to have higher PSE completion rates, which may be due to remote areas having limited access to higher education. While Indigenous Peoples are on average less likely to be employed in professional occupations[1] than non-Indigenous peoples (14.7% vs. 22.9%) (Melvin, 2023), those with a bachelor's degree are more likely to have better employment outcomes. Among Indigenous bachelor's degree holders, 55.7% are employed in professional roles, compared to 49.1% of non-Indigenous peoples. This suggests that, for Indigenous Peoples, higher levels of education are more strongly associated with employment—and especially with professional employment (Cicero & Scott, 2006).

Despite progress in education and employment for Indigenous Peoples, there is still a widening gap in PSE attainment between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Significant efforts and initiatives across Canada have aimed to increase PSE completion among Indigenous Peoples, with organizations such as Indspire providing funding to support Indigenous Peoples in pursuing and completing PSE. In addition to efforts aimed at increasing Indigenous PSE graduation rates, Indigenous labour market and skills training programs exist to improve Indigenous employment outcomes. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2018) found that successful and effective programs were: a) Indigenous-led and included governance through partnerships and engagement, b) offered culturally sensitive services, c) included local leadership, and d) had community-driven initiatives.

Recent research that explored the efficacy of skills training in bridging the gap between PSE and the labour market suggests that training can successfully address the needs and gaps for specific skills (Santoro & Walsh, 2022). Such training programs have positively impacted participating Indigenous populations, as is evident through reported increases in earnings (Foley et al., 2022). Other labour-market research has examined how different factors influence the quality of Indigenous employment (compensation and benefits, working conditions, professional development opportunities, etc.). These factors include career stage, location (e.g., outside urban areas; Brunet et al, 2024), and sector-specific challenges and barriers (Khanam et al., 2024).

1. Professional occupations require completion of university degrees (bachelor's, master's, or doctorate) or previous experience and expertise in subject matter knowledge from a related occupation found in TEER 2 (when applicable). See: https://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p3VD.pl?Function=getVD&TVD=1380438&CVD=1380439&CPV=1&CST=01052021&CLV=1&MLV=5.

Although more Indigenous Peoples are entering the labour market and graduating from PSE, barriers remain. For many Indigenous Peoples, the transition from PSE to the labour market is often complicated by systemic challenges, including limited opportunities in rural and remote areas (Melvin, 2023), health disparities related to the impacts of colonialism, and workplace discrimination (Durand-Moreau et al., 2022). Despite the recent growth in the number of Indigenous PSE graduates and a higher proportion of Indigenous Peoples in the working-age population (15–64 years; Melvin, 2023), little is understood of individuals' transition from PSE to the labour market. More specifically, there is a gap in understanding the barriers individuals face when entering the labour market, ranging from the hiring process to their integration and long-term career development. This lack of knowledge can create difficulties in developing appropriate resources to support the effective recruitment, development, and retention of Indigenous talent in the labour market. The absence of these insights not only affects the successful integration and development of Indigenous Peoples in the workplace, it also directly impacts the broader Canadian labour market.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the transition to the labour market as it is experienced by Indigenous Peoples. Specifically, the study aimed to explore the perspective of:

1. Indigenous employees on, and factors that influence, their transition to the labour market, and
2. Recruiters and employers on how they can better support Indigenous Peoples in order to enhance recruitment and retention efforts.

Capturing both perspectives allows for the identification of insights and offers an opportunity to establish best practices and develop more tailored recommendations to support Indigenous Peoples in their transition to the labour market.

Funded by and in support of Employment and Social Development Canada's *Skills and Partnership Fund*, Indspire undertook this project to advance understanding of demand-driven opportunities targeted at Indigenous learners' transition from PSE to the labour market. By engaging in a qualitative exploration of these experiences, this work also complements Indspire's related projects, which were predominantly quantitative, aimed at identifying education, labour market, and industry trends to better understand the alignment (or lack thereof) between labour market sector needs and the areas from which Indigenous students are graduating (de Melo & Dehghansai, 2025a; 2025b; de Melo et al., 2025; Research and Impact, 2025). Together, these insights can inform improvements to existing resources and support systems, and aid in the development of more inclusive environments, increased opportunities for growth, and dedicated spaces that empower Indigenous talent's transition to the labour market.

METHOD

Approach

The transition from PSE to the labour market has been identified as a significant challenge for Indigenous Peoples. Previous research in this area has largely taken a quantitative approach (de Melo & Dehghansai, 2025a; 2025b; de Melo et al., 2025; Research and Impact, 2025), however, a qualitative approach which captures the nuances of Indigenous Peoples' lived experiences throughout this transition is needed. Given the aim of this project was to expand the current knowledge base and explore the subtle gaps and challenges within this transition process, the research team determined that a qualitative approach would be most effective. This approach not only provided deeper insight into participants' experiences, but also aligned with the Six Rs (respect, relationship, relevance, reciprocity, responsibility, and representation) of Indigenous research (see Tsosie et al., 2022) that allowed Indigenous participants to serve as narrators of their journeys, and guide the research outcomes through their lived experiences. To capture the range and diversity of these experiences, the research team adopted a pragmatic lens. This allows researchers to apply the methods and analytical tools best suited to answer the research questions (see Giacobbi et al., 2005). As such, semi-structured interviews were chosen for their flexibility and depth, and thematic analysis was used to interpret the findings.

Recruitment and Selection

The two groups targeted in the study were categorized as "employees" and "employers". Employees were defined as individuals looking to enter or had already transitioned to the labour market. Employers were defined as individuals who had recently participated in, and/or attempted, recruiting and retaining Indigenous talent.

Employee Recruitment and Selection

Employees were recruited through an expression of interest form which Indspire shared through its social media. Inclusion criteria for employees were to: a) have completed (or be in the process of completing) a PSE credential, and b) either be looking for employment or have recently gained employment. To ensure a fair representation across gender, Indigenous identity, and employment sector, researchers then examined and filtered through the expression of interest forms. Researchers also identified participants who had received industry-partner funding during their studies to better understand how these early connections might influence education and employment outcomes. Based on this criteria and process, eight individuals were selected for interviews. Seven of the participants were currently employed, and one participant was in the process of securing employment. All but two participants completed experiential learning[2] during their educational journey. More information on the characteristics of the employees can be found in Appendix A (p. 28).

2. Experiences outside the classroom where learning happens through direct experience. This includes work-integrated learning which is an explicit measure to incorporate experiential learning through real work experiences.

Employer Recruitment and Selection

Employers were recruited through convenience sampling[3], with Indspire reaching out to its existing network of donor contacts who regularly look to expand employment opportunities through Indigenous networks. The purpose of interviewing employers was to better understand current practices and challenges for stakeholders deliberately attempting to recruit Indigenous talent. Eight network partners were contacted, six agreed to participate, and five attended the interviews. All employers, who identified as Indigenous, were from a diverse range of sectors (i.e., energy, finance, and aviation), and held varying positions within their companies. More information on the characteristics of the employers can be found in Appendix B (p. 29).

Data Collection and Analysis

Two separate interview guides—one for employers and one for employees—were developed. The employer guide consisted of the following five sections: a) demographics, b) sponsorship and internship opportunities, c) recruitment process, d) retention, and e) professional development opportunities. Within each section, participants were asked to share barriers and facilitators that influenced their ability to achieve their desired career goals. Some questions in the interview guide included: “What are the current barriers for Indigenous Peoples entering your sector?” and “What do you believe are the key factors that contribute to retaining Indigenous talent?”.

Similarly, the employee interview guide consisted of the following five sections: a) demographics, b) applying for jobs, c) interview process, d) recruitment and transition, and e) persisting barriers. Questions within each section explored barriers and facilitating factors impacting students’ experiences throughout the employment process (e.g., “Can you describe the transition from post-secondary work?” and follow-up questions such as, “Were there any factors that facilitated this transition?” and “Were there any challenges?”).

3. Convenience sampling is a process whereby researchers recruit participants who are most easily accessible to them (Golzar et al., 2022). This process is often used when the population of interest (e.g., Indigenous identifying individuals working for organizations involved in the hiring of Indigenous talent) is difficult to reach. For more on this topic, see Golzar et al., 2022.

METHOD

One-on-one interviews between each participant and a researcher were conducted and videos lasting 30–60 minutes were recorded through Microsoft Teams and Zoom platforms. Prior to their involvement, all participants were informed of the research purpose, potential outcomes, and implications, as well as provided informed verbal consent. All participants agreed to have their interviews recorded for research purposes. The recordings were transcribed using Otter.ai, and transcripts were anonymized to protect participant confidentiality. Any identifying information was removed or redacted, and pseudonyms were used to refer to participants to ensure that individuals could not be personally identified in the final research outputs.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Clarke & Braun, 2013). Thematic analysis is a method used in qualitative research to identify, report, and interpret patterns (themes) within data (Clarke & Braun, 2017). It provides a flexible approach for interpreting meaning from participants' experiences while maintaining a systematic structure. The analysis began with repeated reading and general note-taking of the interview transcripts to ensure familiarity with the data. This was followed by the process of coding, whereby labels were assigned to points of interest. Coding was completed inductively, meaning that the analysis, and thereby theme generation, was driven by the data as opposed to a pre-existing framework (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Moreover, an inductive approach uses the voices and experiences of participants as a starting point to engage with meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Codes were then reviewed and organized into initial patterns, which were then categorized into overarching themes and subthemes that reflected the breadth and depth of the participants' experiences.

The methodological approach in this study aligned with First Nations principles of ownership, control, access, and possession (OCAP®) by centering the voices and experience of Indigenous participants. As such, findings from this research were shared with the participants to ensure their voices were accurately represented. Research was conducted with a commitment to ensuring findings reflect participants' perspectives and meaningfully contribute to supporting Indigenous Peoples in their transition to the labour market.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study sought to examine the transition from PSE to the labour market from the viewpoints of Indigenous employees and employers. Through a thematic analysis, three overarching themes and four sub-themes were identified:

1. Breaking Into the Labour Market (with the sub-themes of The Current Landscape and Missing Opportunities, p. 15) captured barriers faced entering the labour market,
2. Pivotal Career Point (p. 17 with the sub-themes of Employee Needs, p. 17, and Employer Efforts, p. 18) discussed the resources needed to successfully transition to the labour market, and
3. Experiential Learning Expanding Horizons (p. 20) explored the importance of experiential learning in curating professional networks during PSE.

It is important to note that themes overlapped and were, at times, closely connected. The following section discusses the findings in detail.

1. Breaking into the Labour Market

The transition to the labour market can be challenging—requiring individuals to adjust to new routines, take on new roles and responsibilities, and operate with a level of independence not usually experienced within PSE classrooms. Both employees and employers in this study focused their attention on the early stages of this transition, specifically the barriers to entering the labour market. Insights are provided into these barriers through the following two subthemes: 1) the current state of the job market, and 2) challenges in locating employment opportunities.

1a. The Current Landscape

Employers explained that available work opportunities were related to location and the overall job market. Sarah, an employer in the energy sector, explained that the location of her company might be undesirable to prospective employees:

> ***"Our opportunities for new grads and for co-op placements are primarily in [a city]. We do have some that are field-based, which is another element that a lot of students don't find that desirable—the fly in, fly out to that camp-based environment."***

Similarly, Noah (employer, energy sector) commented:

> ***"Our biggest hurdle is geography because most [Indigenous] communities are not based near big cities."***

The reluctance of Indigenous Peoples to move to large urban areas highlights the broader and more significant systemic challenges of how the current labour market is structured. For many, leaving their communities to move into colonized spaces for school and work has been identified as a major challenge for Indigenous Peoples (Bunting, 2022). Noah's reflections on qualified Indigenous Peoples' reluctance to move to these large urban areas highlight the systemic challenges and points to the exclusionary nature of systems that were not built to include or empower Indigenous voices.

Some employers suspect that, as the global economy suffers, the local economy will see a reduction in employment opportunities. Amelia, an employer in the finance sector, remarked:

> ***"I think it's just the market right now—it's really the world that feels like it's crumbling a little bit. So, I'm definitely feeling it on the talent side—there's not a lot of teams that are needing support, and there's not a lot of projects coming in."***

In 2025, the United Nations reported that, despite the implementation of global fiscal measures to reduce inflation and improve labour markets, global economic growth remains below pre-pandemic levels. In Canada, between January 2024 and 2025, the rate of overall unemployment increased by just over 1% (Statistics Canada, 2025). Additionally, hiring practices and the overall Canadian labour market may have been feeling the effects of the recent trade tensions between Canada and its largest trading partner, the United States of America (Williams & Lawson, 2025).

While the employers advocated for employment of Indigenous Peoples, they faced challenges in having their organization implement their proposals. For example, Samantha (employer, energy sector) discussed the difficulty in ensuring that each hiring cycle includes opportunities designated specifically for Indigenous applicants:

> ***"You may go to one [corporate] leader and suggest doing an Indigenous-specific posting. They're like, 'Oh, yeah, that's a good idea.' But then when it comes down to it, they forget, or there's no accountability … some leaders just aren't seeing how they can contribute to that, or don't think it's their responsibility, and are kind of putting it on other people. And it's kind of this big thing of tag going on."***

In addition to hiring initiatives for Indigenous Peoples, organizations have other diversity, equity, and inclusion criteria that must be considered. This can negatively impact the number of positions allocated to Indigenous-identifying individuals. This is particularly important, as participants in both groups expressed frustration about Indigenous applicants competing for positions alongside other cohorts. For some, organizational efforts to hire Indigenous Peoples felt more like a checkbox exercise to meet diversity quotas rather than a meaningful commitment to inclusion.

1b. Missing Opportunities

All employee participants expressed challenges in finding employment opportunities. They attributed this to a lack of awareness, low visibility of job postings, and an overwhelming volume of redundant information that made it difficult to identify meaningful opportunities online. At the same time, employers expressed difficulty in finding Indigenous talent—highlighting a disconnect between job seekers and employers, despite shared intentions. In describing these challenges, Noah (employer, energy sector) said:

> ***"A lot of Indigenous youth are not … realizing that there's opportunities for them. Absolutely, that's a huge, huge barrier for us."***

This sentiment was reiterated by Emily (employee, teacher), who said:

> ***"When looking for positions, a lot of them were posted through Facebook, and you know, they were in places where I was unfamiliar … I don't think most people are aware of where you can find teaching jobs—there is a site, but again … they don't update, they'll keep old postings on and not take them down, or they'll forget about them and say, 'oh, sorry they're not looking' and people are applying … I really feel like maybe we need, especially in education, a platform that really speaks to all [individuals looking for work]."***

Damon (employer, human resources professional) noted that job boards were often "bogged down" with unnecessary information. Both Damon and Emily highlighted challenges in searching for work opportunities, including not knowing where to look and encountering inaccurate or outdated job postings. As a result, employees heavily relied on their personal and professional networks to locate work. For instance, at the time of the interview, Oliver (employee) was in the process of securing employment, which was only made possible through his mother's professional network. Reliance on personal networks can be limiting for those in early career stages, particularly if their programs provide little opportunity to expand their networks beyond their community.

Employers have recognized these challenges and taken steps to raise awareness of opportunities specifically designated for Indigenous applicants. Employers are investing in campus recruiters and making efforts to integrate recruiters into Indigenous communities to attract Indigenous employees. Nathan (employer, aviation) explained that he was visiting various non-traditional locations for recruitment:

> ***"I'm doing these job fairs. I'm going to women's shelters, friendship centres across Canada, knocking on doors, introducing myself, and inviting the communities to job fairs."***

Employers raised concerns that some applicants chose not to self-identify as Indigenous. Individuals may choose not to self-identify as Indigenous in applications for several reasons including: lack of awareness of the importance of self-identification, missing necessary documentation, or reluctance to claim their identity given continuous experiences of discrimination. Moreover, recipients of bursaries, scholarships, or internships through Indigenous organizations such as Indspire were not listing this information in their applications, as explained by Sarah (employer, energy sector) who said:

> ***"You know, just getting them to apply and identifying that they are an Indspire scholarship or a BBF recipient is really important."***

When individuals specify that they have received bursaries, scholarships, or internships through Indigenous organizations such as Indspire, they offer informal identity indicators and can assist hiring managers in identifying potential candidates.

Summary

The transition to the labour market poses significant challenges, especially for Indigenous applicants, who face barriers in accessing opportunities and navigating a complex job market. Geographic location, changes in market trends, and limited awareness of available positions make it harder for Indigenous Peoples to find employment. Job search platforms can be inefficient, and many applicants struggle to identify relevant opportunities. While employers are working to increase outreach and create targeted roles, more research and collaboration between employers, Indigenous organizations, and job platforms is needed to improve access to opportunities and ensure Indigenous applicants are supported throughout the process.

2. Pivotal Career Point

Participants identified the transition to the labour market as a pivotal moment in their career pathways. During this phase, access to supportive resources was seen as critical to success. The employee group spoke at length on the resources that they found most helpful, or believed would have helped, during the transition to the labour market. The first subtheme, Employee Needs, encapsulates these views. When reflecting on this transition, employers described the initiatives they were taking to support Indigenous employees as they entered the labour market. These insights are described in the second sub-theme: Employer Efforts (p. 18).

2a. Employee Needs

The three main resources requested by employees were mentorship (e.g., passed on learnings from others with similar experiences), learning job application skills (e.g., writing resumés, navigating job sites, and interview process), and developing a professional network (e.g., which events to attend, professional ways of communicating, and developing social skills) to secure employment. This was captured by the following statement made by Adam (employee, lawyer):

> ***"I think the mentorship part of it is the most important thing that I got … [my mentor] helped with things like resumés, interviewing, and making new connections in the industry."***

The need for these resources was supported by other employees. Elaborating on the idea of skill building, Jessie (employee, dental hygienist) said:

> ***"A resumé building class or a one-hour Zoom thing that you could go on—that would be really helpful … mock interviews could probably help too."***

This was corroborated by Addison (employee, pharmacist) who proposed targeted workshops to help students acquire these skills. Whereas Adam spoke of mentors creating networking opportunities, Oliver (currently seeking employment) emphasized that someone should be helping students make connections in the labour market. The value of a professional network in the job search process cannot be understated, and this was described by Addison (employee, pharmacist) who noted:

> ***"It's not what you know, but it's who you know."***

Finally, participants in this study discussed the importance of having job-related experience upon graduation, as Damon (employee, human resources professional) explained:

> **"Nobody wants you without any experience, but nobody will give you experience because you have no experience … it's hard to get that initial experience to actually get any jobs after school."**

2b. Employer Efforts

The Employee group highlighted various resources that would support their transition to the labour market. Interestingly, they were often unsure who should be responsible for providing these resources. Interviews with employers revealed that, in some cases, organizations were working to fill these gaps. For example, Sarah (employer, energy sector) was offering to review cover letters and provide professional advice for Indigenous students connected with her through a support program. As she explained:

> ***"I'm there as a resource if they want to reach out for a cover letter and how to kind of get their name to the top of the list, because we really want to encourage those students to apply."***

Amelia (employer, finance) also offered Indigenous students personalized support through one-on-one meetings and career counselling. She shared:

> ***"I talk to them about what their interests are and things like that, and their experience, and then I advise them on what the next steps are going to be."***

Furthermore, the employers used organizational resources and partnerships to provide networking and experiential learning opportunities specifically for Indigenous applicants.

Related to onboarding, various strategies have been implemented to help manage the transition of new employees to the workplace. For example, some of the employers interviewed have created Indigenous sharing circles, involved Elders in the workplace, and implemented Indigenous-specific cultural-awareness training for staff. In addition, employers emphasized the importance of the retention of Indigenous employees and appropriate workplace polices to reflect the unique needs of Indigenous employees. Samantha (employer, energy sector) shared some practices implemented by her workplace:

> ***"Our [insurance] packages, making sure that there is coverage for healing practices, elder consultation, and then right down to our bereavement policies."***

It is important to recognize that not all organizations engage in these practices, and this level of support is not yet common practice. However, these examples from employers represent opportunities and best practices that could serve as methods for others looking to provide similar support.

Employees transitioning from PSE to the labour market identified mentorship, job application skills, and professional networking as key resources for securing employment. The employees further suggested targeted workshops and mock interviews to enhance these skills. Some organizations have made efforts to address these gaps by offering networking opportunities and experiential learning specifically for Indigenous applicants. While some resources are available, such as cover letter reviews and career counselling from employers, there is uncertainty about who should be responsible for providing these services. Moreover, the services are not standard nor universal across any labour sector. Further collaboration between employers, educational institutions, and Indigenous communities could help ensure these resources become widely implemented and accessible.

3. Experiential Learning Expanding Horizons

Experiential learning was defined as "experiences outside the classroom that facilitate and enable work experience and networking opportunities". Experiential learning can be attained through aspects built into the educational curriculum (e.g., teaching placements and clinical rotations) or can be sought out by students (e.g., research assistantships and internships). In this sample, six out of eight employees participated in experiential programs during their PSE. The other two individuals, who did not have this opportunity, recognized the importance of pursuing such programs and the positive effect it would have had on securing employment.

As discussed in the preceding section, the employees shared that they would have benefitted from relevant job experience and a more expansive network upon their graduation from PSE. Both employees and employers identified that one of the main advantages of participating in experiential learning was curating a professional network. For example, Addison (employee, pharmacist) explained:

> ***"Having programs like internships … definitely help, by the time that you graduate, they connect you with people out there who are kind of doing what you're looking to do for your future."***

Elaborating on this, Amelia (employer, finance) recounted a story of an intern who leveraged her network to secure employment later on:

> ***"There's one student this cycle who had an opportunity with our [internship program], got in, had a work term, and applied for another co-op position, this time in a different field that he liked. But, while he was here, he talked to some managers that were in the field he wanted to go to. This cycle, he actually got a recommendation from one of them and got a return opportunity, because he built those connections ... So, there is success once people practice [networking]."***

Experiential learning is a good tool for creating job-related experiences. Jessie (employee, dental hygienist) shared that she carried the knowledge from her practicum into her full-time work:

> ***"Going into this profession, at least, you have that [practicum] to look back on and be like, 'oh yeah, when I was in my practicum the hygienist did this', and so you can use that experience for yourself."***

Whereas Abigail (employee, research analyst) used experiential learning to identify gaps in her understanding of the subject area:

> ***"It was definitely the stuff that I learned in the first internship with [company], because I wasn't really aware of, like, data gaps [and] data capacities. That just wasn't on my radar whatsoever before that role."***

Throughout the interviews, it was clear that all participants perceived experiential learning to play a prominent role in securing employment. For example, several employees, such as Emily (teacher), Jessie (dental hygienist), and Adam (lawyer), gained employment at the organization where they completed their practicums. On the other hand, Addison (pharmacist) used her experiences during her placement to secure employment at a different company, and Abigail (research analyst) was recruited for her current job through the network she built during her internship. Moreover, the transition to the labour market was described as easier once an individual had gained work experience. As Adam (lawyer) shared:

> ***"It kind of all just felt like one process, like I was a student one day, and then I was articling, and then I got hired. It does feel very smooth in that sense."***

In the current job market, job experience has become a crucial factor in securing employment, often acting as a key differentiator for candidates. For students, experiential learning provides an effective means of acquiring essential work experience and establishing professional networks that significantly enhance employability. Therefore, incorporating more structured and accessible experiential learning opportunities into PSE can be an invaluable resource for students.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

This work is among the first to explore and describe the experiences of Indigenous Peoples as they transition from PSE to the labour market. By including both Indigenous employers and employees, this study paints a more holistic image of this transition and highlights key considerations that could help better prepare Indigenous Peoples for entry into, and progression in, the labour market.

One of the key findings from this study was the significant impact and value of experiential education. These opportunities act as micro-exposures to the workplace, allow students to develop their practical skills, and provide valuable opportunities to expand professional networks. All three of which were highlighted by employees as facilitators that can ease the transition to the labour market. The employee group also identified mentorship as a key support during this transition. Mentors played an important role in helping Indigenous employees navigate the job search process and build confidence. The effectiveness of mentorship was also emphasized by several employers.

For employers, offering experiential learning opportunities for students can create positive long-term outcomes leading to recruitment and retention of Indigenous talent. Combining experiential learning opportunities with mentorship programs and culturally relevant workplace practices (such as flexible leave policies, Indigenous cultural awareness, and dedicated Indigenous roles) can further the likelihood of attracting and retaining Indigenous talent within the workforce.

PSE institutions have a vital role to play in supporting the development of job application skills and recruitment strategies (e.g., resumé development, search platforms, submission timelines, interview preparation, career navigation, and network building) through targeted courses, workshops, and resources. While some institutions already offer options for experiential education opportunities, these programs are not yet widely implemented across institutions and fields of study. Employees noted that even when resources did exist, they were not always well-advertised or easy to access.

Organizations such as Indspire can play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between PSE and industry partners by offering experiential learning opportunities and utilizing their national platforms to ensure these opportunities are accessible and communicated to Indigenous communities.

LIMITATIONS

As with any qualitative research, it is important to interpret these findings with consideration for the study's context and limitations. For instance, this study included slightly more employee interviews (*n*=8) than employer interviews (*n*=5). While both perspectives are essential, the recommendations may reflect a stronger emphasis on employee experiences due to this difference in representation.

The sample of Indigenous employees was composed primarily of individuals who were highly educated and had professional careers (e.g., lawyers and dental hygienists). Many of their PSE programs included built-in experiential education components, such as law clinics, teaching practicums, and clinical placements, which may not be as common in other fields of study. Indeed, only two out of eight employees did not have experiential learning embedded into their PSE program. Consequently, there is a strong emphasis on the importance and benefits of experiential education. Thus, future research should include participants from a broader range of PSE programs, particularly those with fewer experiential learning opportunities. Nevertheless, given the strong sentiment in favour of experiential learning communicated by all participants, the importance of experiential learning in today's labour market cannot be ignored.

Convenience sampling was used to recruit employers into this study. As a result, our findings may over-represent experiences of organizations that already support and engage with Indigenous employees, rather than experiences of employers in general. Moreover, employers' organizations were already committed to effortful ways of recruiting Indigenous talent. However, this sampling approach was intentional, as one of the objectives of this research was to identify best practices currently employed in the labour market in supporting Indigenous Peoples' professional aspirations. While the supports implemented by employers have not yet been confirmed as definitive "best practices", they offer valuable insights into what some organizations are doing to create more inclusive and supportive environments for Indigenous employees. Therefore, the findings provide a starting point to inform organizations on what they can do to improve their ability to support Indigenous Peoples transitioning from PSE to the labour market.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to better understand how Indigenous Peoples experience the transition from PSE to the labour market, a journey that is shaped by both structural barriers and empowering opportunities. Through interviews with both Indigenous employees and employers supportive of Indigenous applicants, this research provided meaningful insights into the challenges, supports, and strategies that influence this critical stage in career development.

The findings suggest a transition that is complex, noting the systemic barriers that Indigenous Peoples navigate when seeking employment. Indigenous job seekers continue to face obstacles including geographic isolation and lack of opportunities in rural and remote areas (Melvin, 2023), limited access to reliable job information, workplace discrimination (Durand-Moreau et al., 2022), and a lack of tailored resources.

Employers can play a key role in removing these barriers and improving the career pathways for Indigenous Peoples. Some of these efforts could include designated hiring opportunities, mentorship programs, flexible leave policies, and culturally inclusive workplace environments that demonstrate meaningful and intentional strategies for reconciliation efforts. Employers can support Indigenous Peoples beyond the transition to the workplace by supporting local Indigenous businesses and embedding external Indigenous services into their organizations as much as possible.

In conjunction with organizations, PSE institutions bear responsibility in preparing Indigenous students for the workforce. They can fulfill this obligation by implementing application-focused skills and strategy training, embedding experiential learning opportunities within the curriculum, and working to dismantle barriers specifically faced by Indigenous students (Bunting, 2022; St. Germaine, 2022). Furthermore, organizations such as Indspire are uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between education and employment by coordinating opportunities for experiential learning, expanding awareness, and ensuring culturally grounded supports are in place.

While this study offers valuable insights and examples of promising practices, it also underscores the need for continued collaboration, innovation, and systemic change. Investing in programs and partnerships that center Indigenous voices and experiences will benefit Indigenous Peoples and strengthen Canada's broader labour market by including diverse perspectives and talent. Ultimately, supporting Indigenous Peoples in their transition from PSE to the labour market is not simply a matter of closing employment gaps; it is an opportunity to build a more equitable, inclusive, and dynamic workforce for the future and a step toward reconciliation.

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APPENDIX A: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF THE EMPLOYEES

Name[4]	Job	Experiential Learning
Abigail	Research Analyst	Yes, completed an internship through Indspire
Adam	Lawyer	Yes, built into the educational program
Addison	Pharmacist	Yes, built into the educational program
Damon	Human Resources	No
Emily	Teacher	Yes, built into the educational program
Jessie	Dental Hygienist	Yes, built into the educational program
Oliver	Seeking Employment	Yes, research assistantship
Stephanie	Government Employee	No

4. Names here were changed to maintain confidentiality of the participants.

APPENDIX B: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF THE EMPLOYERS

Name[5]	Industry	Role
Amelia	Finance	Indigenous Campus Recruiter
Nathan	Aviation	Indigenous Relations
Noah	Energy	Indigenous Relations
Samantha	Energy	Human Resources
Sarah	Energy	Indigenous Relations

5. Names here were changed to maintain confidentiality of the participants.

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