

Province of British Columbia Background Paper Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education and Training Issues and Opportunities (LLL #2)

BACKGROUND:

Aboriginal people represented 4.4 percent of the British Columbia population in 2001, an increase from 2.8 percent in 1996. Based on Ministry of Advanced Education's (AVED) 2002/03 baseline data, there were approximately 13,900 Aboriginal students in British Columbia's public post-secondary institutions representing 3.7 percent of the student population. Also, the number of Aboriginal learners who completed high school has increased from 34 percent to 42 percent over the past five years. However, this is still well below the provincial completion rate of 77 percent¹.

Aboriginal learners in the post-secondary education system are more likely than non-Aboriginal learners to be female, single parents and older than the general student population. According to the 2001 BC College and Institute Aboriginal Former Student Outcomes report, while labour market participation rates rose for surveyed Aboriginal students from 80 percent in 1995 to 86 percent in 2001, unemployment rates for Aboriginal former students have remained consistently higher than for non-Aboriginal former students.

A major challenge in terms of research in the field of Aboriginal education is the lack of statistical data on Aboriginal ancestry. Post-secondary institutions are limited in their ability to track Aboriginal enrolment and data collected given that this is dependent on student self-identification. Better statistical evidence on enrolment and completion rates of specific post-secondary programs will make policy-making more effective.

DISCUSSION:

A highly regarded research report, prepared by R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd. for the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation in partnership with Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), was released January 2004. The Malatest Report confirmed that there are several significant barriers preventing Aboriginal students from attending and succeeding in the post-secondary education system including:

- **Historical:** The legacy of residential schools remains a major barrier to Aboriginal participation.
- **K-12 to Post-Secondary Transition:** A significant percent of the Aboriginal population fails to complete high school and has poor foundation skills.
- **Geographic & Demographic:** Most post-secondary institutions are located in urban centers. Aboriginal people in rural and remote communities have identified the need

¹ Source: How Are We Doing? (Ministry of Education, 2002).

to access education from their communities and not leave for extended periods of study.

- **Social/Cultural:** Many post-secondary education institutions do not reflect Aboriginal culture, traditions and values. Also, post-secondary institutions are primarily comprised of non-Aboriginal faculty and staff resulting in limited understanding of the different learning styles and needs of Aboriginal learners.
- **Funding:** There has been no significant increase in federal government educational support for tuition and living out allowances for people living on reserve for a very long time.

The Malatest Report can be viewed at:

http://www.millenniumscholarships.ca/en/research/aboriginal_en.pdf

Strategies/Opportunities

Key strategies and initiatives, which work towards addressing these issues include:

- **Access Programs:** Sponsoring programs for students that have not had the opportunity for university education because of social, economic or cultural reasons.
- **Community-Based Delivery:** Community delivery (including distance education opportunities) allows Aboriginal students to complete some or all of their post-secondary education in home communities.
- **Partnerships Between Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Institutions:** Aboriginal groups get specialized post-secondary education for their own people by developing joint programs with institutions.
- **Aboriginal-Geared Programs at Mainstream Institutions:** Larger institutions offer specific programs designed to meet the specific needs and interests of Aboriginal students.
- **Curriculum Development:** Non-aboriginal Canadians set traditional curriculum, guidelines and testing. Letting Aboriginal educators control curriculum development works towards addressing this issue.
- **Aboriginal Languages:** Instruction in Aboriginal languages as part of the preservation of traditions builds Aboriginal pride.
- **Math and Sciences:** Stronger preparation of Aboriginal students in secondary schools in math and sciences to increase enrolment in these fields in post-secondary institutions.
- **Student Support Services:** Smaller classes, mentors, tutors and teachers adopt a teaching style more open-minded and accepting to Aboriginals. More academic and personal support networks.
- **Aboriginal Institutions:** Whenever Aboriginal people are given control of their own programs or institutions there is a higher rate of success in enrolment and graduation.
- **Funding:** There is a need to increase federal support for Aboriginal student financial assistance (both on and off reserve).

Recent AVED Initiatives

No single strategy addresses all of the barriers to Aboriginal post-secondary education identified above. The following section, however provides a glimpse of some of the recent initiatives AVED is working on.

Draft Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education and Training Policy Framework

British Columbia's draft Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education and Training Policy Framework (APF), works towards addressing several of the issues cited above and highlights several initiatives AVED is undertaking to enhance opportunities for Aboriginal people to pursue post-secondary education and training.

More specifically, AVED's draft APF identifies initiatives, which will assist in addressing:

- K-12 to post-secondary education transition;
- Accountability and evaluation;
- Aboriginal post-secondary education funding;
- Aboriginal programming and curriculum development;
- Aboriginal student support services;
- Program delivery mechanisms;
- Aboriginal educational institutions;
- Coordination and collaboration with Aboriginal communities/organizations and governments at all levels;
- Capacity building; and,
- Partnerships.

The APF is expected to be finalized and released in late fall 2004.

AVED Forum on Aboriginal Post Secondary Education Issues

On February 23, 2004, AVED held an all-day forum regarding issues and opportunities for the future of Aboriginal post-secondary education and training in British Columbia. Over 130 education experts from across British Columbia participated in the forum. Many of the issues and strategies raised by forum participants echo the points cited above.

In response to several of the issues raised at the forum, AVED committed to undertaking twenty actions. Details regarding the forum and AVED's commitments can be found at:

<http://www.aved.gov.bc.ca/aboriginal/>

Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC)

On September 28, 2004, the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) issued a news release stating that one of its three priorities is Aboriginal post-secondary education. More specifically, ministers agreed to cooperate on developing a shared

approach, in consultation with Aboriginal peoples, to engaging the federal government in developing strategies to improve educational success for aboriginal students. The news release can be found at:

<http://www.cmec.ca/releases/press.en.stm?id=16>

Aboriginal Special Projects Funding (ASPF)

The primary purpose of the ASPF program is to increase participation, success and retention rates for Aboriginal learners in British Columbia. Since 2001, approximately 115 ASPF projects have been funded by AVED totalling about \$6 Million - over 2900 Aboriginal learners have benefited from this funding. ASPF projects have covered the following key program areas: Health; Social Work; Justice/Law; Community Economic Development; Tourism and Tourism Management; Natural Resource Management; Math and Science; Forestry; Aboriginal Languages; Trades; and On-line Learning.

Aboriginal Health and Social Workers

The Northern Medical Program at Prince George is seeking to increase the number of Aboriginal physicians in BC. The province is also working on increasing the number of Aboriginal social workers in the province by funding an additional 20 full-time student spaces per year in Bachelor of Social Work and Bachelor of Arts, Child and Youth Care programs at public post-secondary education institutions delivering these programs in 2002/03, 2003/04 and 2004/05.

Regional Innovation Chairs in the area of Aboriginal Early Childhood Development

British Columbia introduced a \$7.5 million British Columbia Regional Innovation Chairs program to create six chairs at British Columbia's colleges, university colleges and institutes. Two of the six chairs will be dedicated to Aboriginal early childhood development to support research into culturally appropriate services and increase awareness of the importance of children's early years in Aboriginal communities.

Forum of Labour Market Ministers (FLMM)

The FLMM has undertaken discussions on how to improve the flexibility and effectiveness of labour market programming. Reducing barriers to employment for Aboriginal people is one of six priority areas under discussion.

CONCLUSION:

Although there has been considerable progress in Aboriginal post-secondary education in British Columbia over the past few years, there is still much more work to be done. Many of the key issues identified in the January 2004 Malatest Report continue to persist. There is therefore an on-going need to identify and implement strategies together, which work towards addressing these issues.