

**J.P. White**

## **AN OVERVIEW OF INDIGENOUS EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT IN CANADA**

*The article describes the reasons for low educational attainment levels among Indigenous peoples in Canada as compared to the non-Indigenous population. We examined intra-Indigenous trends in educational attainment and compared attainment levels between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations in Canada across high school and post-secondary education (PSE). Indigenous peoples' educational attainment in Canada is improving: post-secondary attainment increased by 86 percent between 1996 and 2011. This tendency is observed for Métis, off reserve, and non-Status Indians. We justify regional policies aimed at developing the emerging trends for Indigenous peoples' education in Canada.*

**Keywords:** Canada, Indigenous peoples, educational attainment, educational policy

### **INTRODUCTION**

*Indigenous peoples* have typically had lower educational attainment levels compared to the non-Indigenous population in Canada [12]. Research indicates that low levels of education in specific populations are correlated with factors such as socio-economic status [3], ethnicity [5], geography [6], and parental educational attainment [7]. Several studies have indicated that low educational attainment levels among Indigenous peoples in Canada are also tied to colonialism [10]. With an increasing number of Indigenous students at post-secondary institutions, some people feel more optimistic about the direction of attainment levels. Higher educational attainment will likely enhance individual labour market opportunities and possib-

ly benefit Indigenous communities if educated individuals return home. In this article, recent attainment is examined in-depth. The objectives of the study are the following:

- (a) To examine the most up-to-date data available for Indigenous educational attainment in order to determine whether there has been adequate progress since the 1996 Census in Canada. This assessment involves an examination of intra-Indigenous trends in educational attainment and a comparison between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations in Canada across high school and post-secondary education (PSE).
- (b) To develop some preliminary policy assessments based on the data analysis. cursory comments are made on the current reform proposed by the federal government of Canada announced in February of 2014.

For international and Canadian readers alike, it is important to present a brief history of Indigenous educational policy and practice in Canada first.

## METHODS

Data used in this article come from the 1996, 2001, and 2006 Censuses and the 2011 *National Household Survey (NHS)* of Canada. Publicly available data sets were downloaded that included variables relating to non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal populations, Registered Indian or Treaty Status Indian, on or off reserve status, and Aboriginal identity (First Nations, Inuit, Métis), as well as educational attainment, geographic location, and age group.

Highest educational attainment is defined as a person's «most advanced certificate, diploma, or degree» comprised of (1) less than high school; (2) high school; and (3) post-secondary education (PSE). PSE is further broken down into the following categories: apprenticeship or trades, college or other non-university (herein referred to as college); university below the Bachelor's degree level; and university at or above the Bachelor's degree level. In each data set, there were additional categories that complicate the presumed general hierarchy (high school graduation, trades, college, and university). In order to avoid overestimating high school or PSE attainment, we combined certain categories. In the 1996

Census data set, categories of «some apprenticeship», «some college», and «some university» were collapsed into the high school educational attainment category because no diploma, certificate, or degree was obtained at the PSE level. Similarly, the «some high school» category was grouped with the «less than high school» category. The 2001 to 2006 Censuses and 2011 NHS had an option to examine whether a high school diploma was attained in addition to the highest education achieved. Those who had PSE yet no high school diploma are considered to have less than high school education<sup>1</sup>. In the labour market, potential employees typically have to show their resumé or fill in documentation about their educational achievements; employers will presumably consider those without high school completion to have a relatively lower educational attainment compared to high school graduates.

### LIMITATIONS OF NHS

The Indigenous population in Canada is a very diverse group and aggregate figures can obscure very different attributes. We have attempted to capture some of this diversity by reporting for the on and off reserve populations and by identity group: Métis, First Nations (Status and non-Status), and Inuit. Given the voluntary nature of the NHS, there are inherently more potential groups and geographical areas that may be under enumerated. Therefore, the finer the analysis we do using the NHS data, the more likely there will be «under enumeration impacts» on the findings. The most reliable situation is to have a stable methodology over time that has similar response patterns (like the mandatory long form census).

Statistics Canada reported that approximately 75.3 per cent of the census sub-divisions in Canada were included in the releases. This is lower than the previous Census in 2006. The non-response bias is likely to affect Indigenous estimates generally and in rural centres particularly. Saskatche-

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<sup>1</sup> This is an example of how researchers have to be careful to investigate the specificities of Indigenous communities. Aboriginal Affairs Canada was in the habit of requiring Indigenous persons who were participating in certain transfer programs to enroll in upgrading seminars or short certificate programs. People taking these certificates would often report their engagement as PSE, thereby inflating the PSE numbers.

wan was the most under-reported province and has a high proportion of Indigenous peoples.

In the 2011 NHS, there were a total of 36 Indian reserves and Indian settlements that were incompletely enumerated. According to Statistics Canada, estimates associated with the on/off reserve variable are more affected than other variables because of the incomplete enumeration of these Indian reserves and settlements.

## **RESULTS**

The sheer number of post-secondary Indigenous graduates has increased tremendously over the past 15 years. From 1996 to 2011, there was a total increase of 183,170 Indigenous peoples between the ages 25 to 64 years who attained PSE<sup>2</sup>. The change for each type of PSE by census year during this time period is documented in Table 1. Between 2006 and 2011, there were 21,120 new college graduates and 23,085 new university graduates (at or above Bachelor's degree level). For the most part, steady increases have been made at these educational levels over time. Conversely, apprenticeship or trades numbers are in decline. The drop in the 2006 to 2011 period reverses gains made in the 2001 to 2006 period. Possibly, this decline could indicate that Indigenous post-secondary students are choosing other paths at colleges and universities instead of participating in apprenticeship or trades. It is also possible that fewer apprenticeship opportunities were available for interested students following the 2008 recession.

The increased PSE attainment among the Indigenous population is a success. A real roadblock to a greater number of PSE graduates is low educational attainment. Table 2 shows the rising numbers over time of Indigenous peoples with no high school diploma or equivalent; the number increased by 80,165 in the 1996 to 2011 period. The number of high school graduates with no PSE completion also rose; however, this group is considerably smaller than its less educated counterpart. The Indigenous popula-

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<sup>2</sup> We utilized the 25- to 64-year-old population for two reasons: (1) the 15 and over age population inflates the number of people without high school completion; and (2) the 65 and over age groups are much more likely not to be employed compared to 25 to 64 year olds.

Table 1

**Indigenous Population PSE Attainment, 25 to 64 years, 1996 to 2011,  
Absolute Numbers**

	1996	2001	2006	2011	Change 1996–2011
Apprenticeship or trades	16,000	69,260	80,060	67,045	51,045
College or other non-university	66,935	66,795	103,905	125,025	58,090
University below Bachelor level	n/a	8125	20,050	23,605	15,480*
University at Bachelor or above	15,660	26,340	43,010	66,095	50,435
Total post-secondary education	98,595	170,520	247,025	281,765	183,170
Total Indigenous population	346,485	443,600	555,420	671,380	324,895

\* The increase for this PSE type is for the 2001–2011 time period because data are not available for 1996.

Table 2

**Indigenous Population High School with No PSE and High School  
Non-completion, 25 to 64 years, 1996 to 2011 absolute numbers,  
2016 to 2021 estimated numbers\***

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

\* In order to make the projections for 2016 and 2021, we assume that fertility and mortality rates for the Indigenous population remain at current levels and there are no major shifts in general economic or social conditions.

\*\* Less than high school trend line: slope  $a = 25,818$ ;  $x$  intercept = 124,075;  $r^2 = 0.9182$ .  
High school only trend line: slope  $a = 20,230$ ;  $x$  intercept = 65,533;  $r^2 = 0.9336$ .

tion in Canada is relatively young, which means the numbers of those who are not high school or post-secondary graduates will likely rise if trends remain unchanged. A concern, then, is high school completion. Mendelson reported, «the failure to complete high school explains 88% of the variation

in PSE» [9, p. 31]<sup>3</sup>. Increasing the number of high school graduates increases the number of PSE graduates. Accordingly, high school completion is an important key to moving forward with regard to improving Indigenous PSE attainment.

In Canada's labour market, PSE attainment is critical for gainful employment. Unemployment rates drop with each increasing level of higher education. Among the Indigenous population, the unemployment rate was a high 23.3 per cent for those who did not complete high school; it fell to 11.4 per cent for those with high school only, and then to 9.3 per cent for those with PSE. We estimate that 278,983 Indigenous peoples (25–64 years of age) will not have a high school education in 2021. Given the economic outcomes associated with higher education, this number is very high. We agree with Mendelson [9] but also note that there are important considerations in terms of improving high school graduation rates. As noted earlier in this article, some are resources, curriculum, social capital and normative issues, some relate to the policy and practice bred by colonialism, and still others relate to the lack of economic opportunity seen by Indigenous youth that dissuade them from seeking credentials.

The Indigenous population is a heterogeneous group. It is not surprising then, that some groups fare better than others. Differences within the Indigenous population of Canada are discussed next.

## **GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION**

As noted earlier, the federal government in Canada has jurisdiction over Indigenous education. Yet, attainment is disproportionate across provinces and territories. Seven provinces (Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and British Columbia) have a higher proportion of PSE than «less than high school» level of education. For example, among the Indigenous population in Nova Scotia, 53 per cent possess a PSE and 26 per cent have not completed high school. The pattern for the remaining provinces and territories is a higher proportion of «less than high school» education than PSE. This makes a useful

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<sup>3</sup> The variables less than high school and PSE completion have a strong negative correlation ( $R^2 = 0.8782$ ) [9].

benchmark for judging where the problems are most acute and where we might find positive approaches that are working.

The most alarming difference is Nunavut where 73 per cent of the Indigenous population has less than a high school education and 15 per cent has a PSE. A notable demographic trend in Canada is that the Northwest Territories and the Prairie Provinces typically have the highest proportions of Indigenous peoples in their populations whereas, in terms of absolute numbers, Ontario has the largest Indigenous population. However, the Indigenous populations of the Territories and Prairies have lower educational attainment. In fact, they have the lowest provincial rates of high school completion with higher proportions of non-high school completion than PSE attainment. British Columbia stands out as a more successful Western province; two-thirds of its Indigenous population have at least a high school education. This province has 130 First Nations community schools, is engaged in defining new treaties and has successfully integrated public and Indigenous run schools [4]. At the other end of Canada, we see better educational attainment. Another more successful area of the country is Nova Scotia where the self-governing educational authorities of Mi'kmaw communities of the province reported high school completion rates of 88 per cent in the 2012 to 2013 school year [8]. This number is well above the national average for Indigenous students and is comparable to the average for the general population of Canada.

In Canada, recent job creation has been higher in Alberta and Saskatchewan [2]. However, these provinces rank relatively poorly with regard to Indigenous educational attainment. If PSE attainment is presumed to make individuals labour market ready, there is a geographical mismatch between a lesser trained Indigenous population and a very hot job market. Possibly, economic development projects are not localized in Indigenous communities.

## **IDENTITY GROUP, STATUS, ON OR OFF RESERVE**

Differences within the Indigenous population of Canada also emerge by the identity group to which one belongs and whether one lives «on reserve» (in a First Nations designated community). Highest educational attainment over time for First Nations (North American Indian), Inuit, Métis,

Status Indian and non-Status Indian, and peoples living on or off reserve<sup>4</sup> is shown in Table 3. One may expect that over the past 15 years, the percentages of high school non-completions would decline and post-secondary attainment would increase. This is not the case for all identity and geographic groups. This trend was observed for Métis, off reserve, non-Status, and First Nations peoples<sup>5</sup>. These particular Indigenous groups have continuously had higher PSE attainment compared to Indigenous peoples living on reserve, Status Indians, or Inuit peoples. In 1996, all seven of these groups had roughly the same proportion of PSE attainment (range 24 per cent to 31 per cent). Fifteen years later, Métis and off reserve peoples more than doubled their respective post-secondary proportions. For example, Métis PSE attainment numbers changed from 30,435 to 117,015—a growth of 285 per cent. Contributing to this growth is the great rise in high school completions. As stated earlier, an increase in high school completions will increase the number of PSE graduates.

This point in time appears to be a turning point for First Nations peoples. Although this population follows the higher education trend previously noted, in 2011, the proportions of those without a high school education and those with a PSE are about the same (40 per cent and 38 per

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<sup>4</sup> Canada has a rather unique system that is the result of colonialism. First Nations (in some documents called Indians) are Indigenous nations historically constituted prior to colonial first contact. They have, over the last four centuries, engaged in forced and voluntary agreements that have limited their traditional territories and created «reserves», which are defined through legislation and signed treaties. Status Indians are those who are registered and have status under the Indian Act and these peoples have reserved land. Some Status Indians live in their reserve communities and some do not (approximately 50 per cent; see White et al, 2003). Those who live on reserve are for all intents and purposes Status Indians. There are also a large population of non-Status Indians who have lost their recognition for various reasons and live in urban and smaller towns. These peoples very often identify in surveys as «First Nation» so any data using «First Nation» includes both Status and non-Status First Nations persons. There are also mixed ancestry persons who identify as a separate Indigenous group known as Métis. These peoples live in more urban centres, and, finally, there are the Inuit who live in large part in Canada's North.

<sup>5</sup> As noted, First Nations persons can be either Status or non-Status. Given that non-Status Indians have higher educational attainment the mean levels of the First Nation category are inflated.

Table 3

**Highest Educational Attainment by Indigenous Group, 25 to 64 years,  
1996 to 2011, Percentages**

	1996	2001	2006	2011
<i>On reserve</i>				
Less than high school	54	48	50	55
High school	22	19	15	18
Post-secondary education	24	32	35	27
<i>Off reserve</i>				
Less than high school	42	35	29	30
High school	28	24	23	24
Post-secondary education	30	41	47	46
<i>Status</i>				
Less than high school	47	42	40	43
High school	26	22	19	21
Post-secondary education	27	36	41	36
<i>Non-Status</i>				
Less than high school	42	35	28	29
High school	27	23	24	24
Post-secondary education	31	42	48	47
<i>First Nations</i>				
Less than high school	46	41	38	40
High school	26	23	20	22
Post-secondary education	27	37	42	38
<i>Inuit</i>				
Less than high school	53	48	51	59
High school	20	20	13	16
Post-secondary education	27	32	36	25
<i>Metis</i>				
Less than high school	41	34	26	26
High school	27	24	24	24
Post-secondary education	31	43	50	49

cent, respectively). Likely in the next census period, the First Nations population will have more PSE graduates than individuals without a high school education.

Attainment of higher levels of education over time is not evident among Inuit or those living on reserve. For on reserve Indigenous, educational attainment levels remained stable. Consistently, a greater proportion of this group has not completed high school than attained a PSE. Inuit educational attainment appears to be worsening; high school non-completions have risen about 11 percentage points over the past 10 years<sup>6</sup>. Among status peoples, non-high school completion is higher compared to post-secondary completion.

## **INDIGENOUS AND NON-INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS**

We see no reason why Indigenous peoples in Canada could not achieve the same levels of education as non-Indigenous peoples if conditions were right. Figure 1 compares highest educational attainment between these populations over time. Similar trends are apparent for both populations: The proportion of those with less than high school education declined, which corresponds with a rise of those with a PSE; high school only attainment has been relatively stable at about 23 per cent from 2001 to 2011.

Although both populations made gains in higher education, little change occurred to the gaps between them with regard to PSE attainment and high school incompleteness. Between 1996 and 2011, Indigenous peoples had a higher percentage – about 19 percentage points – of those with less than high school education compared to non-Indigenous peoples. During the same time, the non-Indigenous population had a higher percentage of those with a PSE – ranging from 16 percentage points in 1996 to 20 percentage points in 2011 – compared to the Indigenous population. The disparity between these populations is not narrowing. Indigenous PSE attainment was 65 per cent of the non-Indigenous PSE attainment in 1996, 70 per cent in 2001, 72 per cent in 2006, and 68 per cent in 2011. At best, the gap has remained at the same level. At worst, it is beginning to increase. Clearly, im-

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<sup>6</sup> We caution readers that the 2011 NHS data were collected using a different methodology than previous Censuses; therefore it will be important to see the next collection periods for comparison (2016 and 2021).

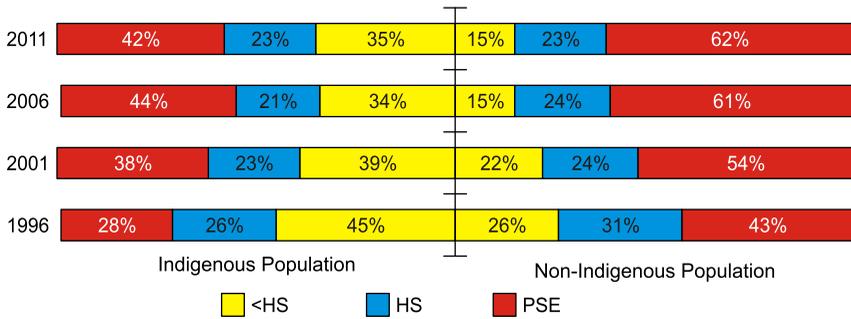


Fig. 1. Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Highest Educational Attainment, 25 to 64 Years, 1996 to 2011, Percentages

proving high school completion for Indigenous peoples is critical if we are to narrow the PSE gap between these groups.

In Figure 2 we compare university PSE attainment for our populations. We could produce figures illustrating all the PSE relationships. We found that there is no gap in trades and apprenticeship attainment between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. For college the attainment remained fairly constant over time for both groups; there is a slight difference between them (a stable two percentage points). In Figure 2, there is a continuous and growing difference between the two trend lines for university attainment. The number of Indigenous degree holders is increasing both absolutely and proportionally, but the increase in non-Indigenous university

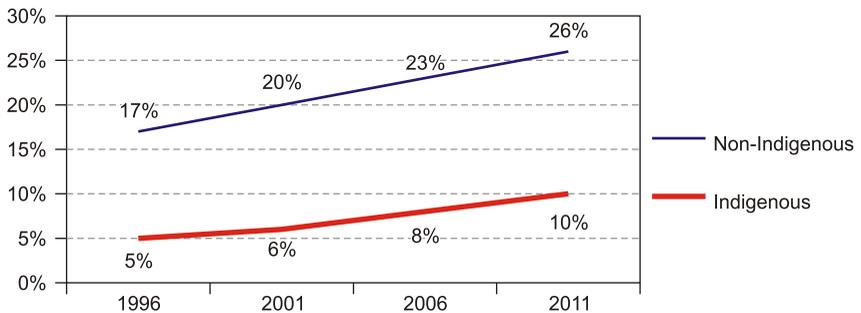


Fig. 2. Indigenous and Non-Indigenous University Attainment, 25 to 64 years, 1996 to 2011

completion is even greater. This gap is slowly widening; from 12 percentage points in 1996 to 16 percentage points in 2011. Considering the trends we see in these different types of PSE, we can say with certainty that university attainment carries the greatest weight in the PSE gap between the two populations.

## **DISCUSSION**

One objective guiding this article was to determine whether adequate progress has taken place with regard to Indigenous peoples' educational attainment in Canada. The answer to this question is of national and international importance. The short answer is that while improvements have been achieved, it should have been better. Below, this answer is elaborated upon. Afterward, we discuss policy attempts since 1996, including the 2014 proposed reforms, and make progressive policy recommendations.

Undoubtedly, strides have been made in Indigenous peoples' educational attainment in Canada. Among Indigenous peoples, the current working age group is more educated compared to this age group in earlier censuses: Post-secondary attainment increased 186 percentage points between 1996 and 2011. The cumulative increase of PSE graduates reveals a source of labour that can make meaningful contributions to the Canadian economy and Indigenous communities. Another sign of moving forward is that this trend is observed for Métis, off reserve, non-Status, and First Nations peoples. Over the past 15 years, high school non-completion declined and PSE attainment rose for these groups. Also, Indigenous success is real in apprenticeships, trades, and colleges—Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations have about the same proportions of graduates for these PSE paths.

These gains connect to resources and economic development. Job creation is typically higher in urban areas than rural areas [2]. Perhaps Métis and off reserve peoples, who tend to live in cities, see the real value and payoff of high school completion and PSE through proximity to such economic activity. Time away from family and community are important factors among Indigenous peoples when determining whether to attend post-secondary institution [11] and deciding among employment options [8]. Urban centres are home to community colleges and many jobs that re-

quire PSE. Disruptions to familial relationships and responsibilities are minimal if urban Indigenous students attend local post-secondary institutions while living at home. Notably, apprenticeship, trades, and college programs require fewer resources, both financial and time, compared to university programs. In short, there may be real socio-cultural and economic explanations for the disparity we see between Status and on reserve Indigenous persons, and the Métis and non-Status populations, the latter having more improved educational attainment and a declining gap with the non-Indigenous population.

Our conclusion that there has not been adequate improvement in attainment rests on the continuing problems faced by on reserve, Status, and Inuit peoples with regards to high school completion. As well, there is the problem of a growing gap in university PSE attainment. This developing gap bodes poorly for engagement in the twenty-first century economy. The number of Indigenous post-secondary graduates increased, but PSE attainment among non-Indigenous peoples is increasing much more quickly. In summary, we would point out that the difference in attainment between populations is not narrowing. The disparity is driven by: (1) continuing lower attainment of high school among Indigenous populations; (2) the increasing difference in university attainment; and (3) socio-cultural and economic disparities related to living on reserve, having Indian Status, and/or being Inuit.

## **POLICY FOR MOVING EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT FORWARD**

Aside from the debate over the 2013 proposals and the continuing disagreements over the recent 2014 redraft, there are several things that will need to change. For any policy to move forward to make real gains there will need to be several elements in place:

- 1) Successful building of PSE attainment requires emphasis on high school completion strategies. This rests in improving the high school curriculum to reflect First Nations peoples in a historically proper light. It means in the short run, introducing more indigenization of the schools and ultimately will require schools built and operated in the territories of the First Nations by Indigenous-led school authorities.

2) Decades of underfunding means large investments are necessary. This is not a form of welfare but rather an explicit recognition that over the colonial history there has been a deep problem created and if we are going to make progress it requires investments. These investments should not be seen as a cost to the non-Indigenous population. It is truly an investment. It leads to improved health and social security for Indigenous peoples through improvement of the social determinants of health; it creates the possibility for hundreds of thousands of Indigenous peoples to engage in the economy. The collective wealth created by such engagement will far outweigh the investments. And lastly, it is simply unacceptable that a segment of the population living in Canada faces the gaps in education (health, labour force participation and income) that exist today.

3) Indigenous control of a properly funded system where voluntary agreements are developed with provincial education systems is a necessary component of any potential solution.

4) Building on successes is critical. It was noted earlier that colleges are relatively successful in attracting and retaining Indigenous students. It was also noted that current self-governing educational authorities in select areas of the country have vastly improved high-school graduation. These models need to be systematically examined and learned from in a practical sense.

5) Creating a generation of mentors and role models will be an important step forward. Much of the research indicates that success leads to success. Parental educational attainment is highly correlated with children's success (see [7]). Improving attainment in each generation, will build greater successes in the next. Maintaining the status quo is in many ways the worst of all alternatives. Educational reform will require that a consensus be built. As Former National Chief Atleo pointed out:

This work is simply too important to walk away and abandon our students to the next round of discussions, to tell them they will have to wait.... We owe it to ourselves, our children and our nations to make our best efforts to achieve our lifelong goal of First Nations control of First Nations education [1].

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