

## THE URGENCY OF POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION FOR ABORIGINAL PEOPLES\*

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Canada has an unprecedented need to increase the number of Aboriginal peoples who undertake and complete postsecondary programs. Endorsing postsecondary education for Aboriginal peoples advocates an invigorating, fortifying future for Aboriginal peoples, their families, and their communities. Additionally, the postsecondary educational achievements of Aboriginal peoples support the health and sustainability of the Canadian nation; spearheaded by Western Canada's current economic prosperity, human resources supplied by Aboriginal peoples have become increasingly important. Captured herein are demographic, social, educational, and economic trends reinforcing the rationale that Aboriginal peoples urgently need to be provided with greater opportunities to succeed in postsecondary education.

Promoting the spiritual, emotional, physical, and academic wellbeing of Aboriginal peoples requires improvements to and sustainability of postsecondary educational opportunities for Aboriginal peoples. The attainment of higher levels of education is related to an improved standard of living, as exemplified through greater employment satisfaction, higher incomes, improved health, and longevity of life (Sloane-Seale, Wallace, & Levin, 2004). Consequently, Stonechild (2006) identified higher education as the *new buffalo*, crucial to the modern-day survival of Aboriginal peoples. Although the number of Aboriginal peoples who are attending

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and completing postsecondary education is increasing (Friesen & Friesen, 2005; Hull, 2005; Rae, 2005), Aboriginal involvement in postsecondary education still lags well behind that of the non-Aboriginal population (Hull, 2005). Within this paper, I explore the demographic, social, educational, and economic trends, which reinforce reasons why Aboriginal peoples urgently need to be provided with greater opportunities to succeed in postsecondary education throughout Canada.

Before discussing the statistical background related to Aboriginal postsecondary education, specific terms used throughout this article need to be highlighted and discussed. The term *Aboriginal* is used as an inclusive term, encompassing all groups of Indigenous people: First Nations, Inuit, Métis, treaty and non-treaty Indians, regardless of their status or place of residence. The term *postsecondary education* refers to any institution that provides education to students beyond high school and incorporates the acquisition of credentials from two major types of educational institutes: university and non-university. Universities predominantly offer certificates, diplomas, and degrees, which are more academic in nature when compared to non-university credentials. Examples of non-university institutes include community colleges, vocational and technical institutes, colleges of applied arts and technology, and, in Quebec, CÉGEPs (Collèges d'enseignement général et professionnel) (Dennison & Schuetze, 2004). Such postsecondary institutes generally offer trade certificates and various diplomas. A synonymous terms associated with postsecondary education is *higher education*.

### **The Statistical Background Supporting Postsecondary Education for Aboriginal Peoples**

The Aboriginal populations represent an important and growing segment of Canada's young labor force. As such, it is vital that Aboriginal peoples are well educated so they are able

to both capitalize on diverse employment opportunities and promote healthy lifestyles within their communities. Demographic, educational, and economic statistics supply data that support a need for Aboriginal peoples to be presented with greater opportunities to succeed in postsecondary education. By understanding this statistical background, the reader will attain a better understanding of why Aboriginal postsecondary graduates are presently in high demand throughout Canada and particularly within the Western Provinces, where there is high demand for an educated workforce to meet the needs of a burgeoning economy.

### ***Aboriginal Population***

Canada's population statistics present a clear message: Aboriginal peoples represent the fastest growing culture in the nation. According to Statistics Canada (2008b), in 2006, the number of Canadian people who identified themselves as Aboriginal surpassed the one million mark. Between 1996 and 2006, the Aboriginal populace grew 45%, nearly six times faster than the 8% increase of non-Aboriginal peoples. During the above timeframes, the First Nations and Inuit populations grew 29% and 26% respectively. Canada's First Nations people account for 60% of the Aboriginal population, the Métis population accounts for 33% of the Aboriginal population, while the Inuit represents 4% of Canada's Aboriginal population. As projected by Statistic Canada (2005b), by the end of 2017 Aboriginal people will constitute approximately 3.4% of the overall working-age population within Canada, thus, identifying the Aboriginal population as vital to the workforce needed to fuel the nation's future economy. Specifically, the Aboriginal population of Saskatchewan represents one of the fastest growing Indigenous populations within the country. According to population projections, by 2020, Aboriginal

students within Saskatchewan will represent 40% of all school-aged youth in the province (Tymchak, 2001).

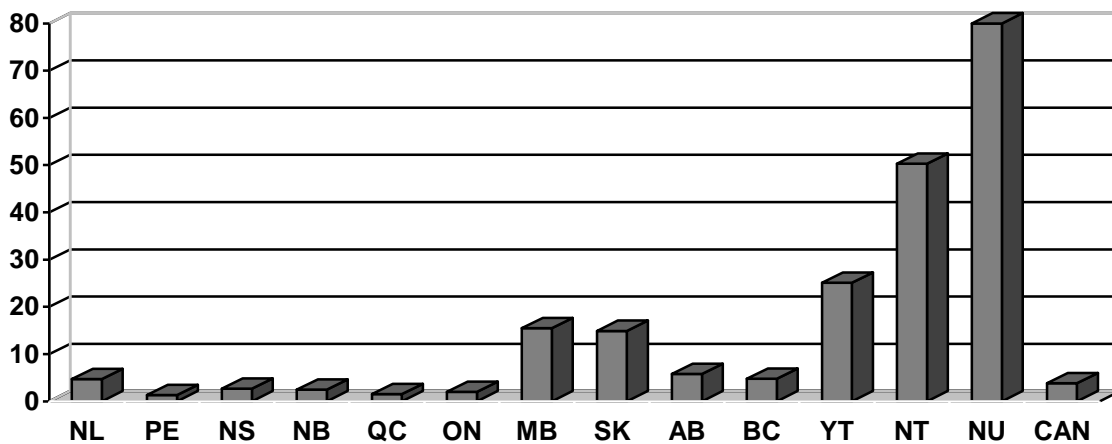
When Canada's Aboriginal population statistics are further scrutinized, there is a noticeable disparity in the percentage numbers of Aboriginal peoples who reside in each province/territory (see *Figure 1*). Within the Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut, Aboriginal peoples make up a substantial proportion of each territory's population. Despite the fact that over one-fifth of Canada's Aboriginal population lives in Ontario and almost another one-fifth of this population lives in Quebec, Aboriginal peoples only account for about 2% of Ontario's and 2% of Quebec's total population. In comparison, within Saskatchewan and Manitoba, Aboriginal peoples constitute approximately 15% of each province's total population. Within Alberta and British Columbia, Aboriginal peoples respectively make up about 6% and 5% of the provinces' total populations.

Economic and social implications abound these population data. The economic vitality and social wellbeing of Saskatchewan and Manitoba, and to a lesser extent Alberta and British Columbia are dependent upon the educational success of Aboriginal peoples and their entry into the workforce. This point is even more applicable within the territories, especially with the renewed interests from private and public sectors in the natural resources of Northern Canada (Natural Science and Engineering Research Council of Canada, 2000). Simply stated, the rapidly growing Aboriginal labor force represents a badly-needed, under-utilized source of human capital (Holmes, 2006).

Increasing postsecondary opportunities for Aboriginal people is not only related to a strong economy, postsecondary opportunities for Aboriginal peoples have the potential to alleviate inequitable social conditions that have been consistently endured by many Aboriginal

peoples. For example, within many Aboriginal communities, housing conditions are sub-standard (Holmes, 2006) and access to clean drinking water are serious health issues (Couture, 2008). Compared to the rest of the nation, Aboriginal infant mortality is double (Friesen & Friesen, 2005). Although varying dramatically across Canada (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998), the suicide rates among Aboriginal peoples has been quoted as three to twenty times higher than the rate of the non-Aboriginal population (Center for Suicide Prevention, 2003; Chandler & Lalonde, 2008; Chandler, Lalonde, Sokal, & Hallett, 2003; Johal, 2007). Poverty, unemployment, poor health conditions are stark realities for many Aboriginal peoples (Friesen & Friesen, 2005). In turn, obtaining higher levels of education promotes a multitude of benefits including the promotion of: healthy lifestyles, healthy social development, positive life choices, and higher incomes (Feinsten, Sabates, Anderson, Sorhaindo, & Hammond, 2006). Thus, postsecondary education is a core topic supporting, promoting, and sustaining the overall health and security of Aboriginal peoples and their culture.

Figure 1: Aboriginal Populations as a Percentage of Total Population



Sources: Statistics Canada (2008a)

### *Median Age*

The information in Table 1 shows a comparison of the median age of Canadian Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples: the median age of the Aboriginal population is about 13 years younger than non-Aboriginal people. As indicated by Table 1, the youngest portion of Aboriginal peoples is concentrated within Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Nunavut, where the median ages of Aboriginal peoples are 22, 24, and 20 respectively. With a young median age, higher fertility rates, and improvements in life expectancy (Steffler, 2008), the Aboriginal population is expected to continue to rise, especially within Northern and Western Canada. In the vanguard of this population growth is Saskatchewan, where the proportion of Aboriginal population in their 20s is expected to almost double during the time period from 2001 to 2017 (Statistics Canada, 2005b).

When bearing in mind that more than 50% of Aboriginal people are not even 30 years old, one can understand how this demographic phenomenon is related to the workplace. Assembly of First Nations National Chief, Phil Fontaine, said he believed Aboriginal youth are a key component to Canada's present and future workforce, but to garner the vast potential of Aboriginal peoples, increased educational opportunities need to be provided for them (Assembly of First Nations, 2008). Moreover, time is crucial. The development and sustainability of quality Aboriginal postsecondary programs needs to be a top priority among government leaders and among Aboriginal communities right now; the foundation for a prosperous future starts with the plans and actions set in place during the present time. Then, in the next ten years, as the overall population of Canada ages and nears retirement, a larger, younger proportion of Aboriginal peoples will have the qualifications and education to accommodate the needs of an ever-increasing diverse workplace. In this way, increasing postsecondary opportunities now for this

predominantly young group of Aboriginal peoples is directly related to the future prosperity of the Canadian society.

Table 1

*Median Age of Aboriginal Peoples Compared to Non-Aboriginal Peoples*

Area	Median Age of Aboriginal Population	Median Age of Non-Aboriginal Population
NL	32.3	41.9
PE	24.1	40.6
NS	29.5	41.8
NB	31.5	41.4
QC	31.1	40.7
ON	27.9	38.9
MB	23.9	40.4
SK	21.7	41.4
AB	24.8	36.4
BC	28.1	41.1
YT	30.1	41.0
NT	26.0	35.1
NU	20.1	36.8
Canada	26.5	39.7

Source: Statistics Canada (2008h)

***Average Income of Various Identity Groups Aligned with Education***

In order to secure employment, educational success matters more today than it did in past generations. A high school diploma is now the minimum requirement for many entry-level jobs. Those aspiring to secure average to well-paying jobs, generally, need to secure postsecondary credentials (Richards & Vining, 2004). Statistics Canada (2005a) stated that in order to decrease unemployment rates, a nation must invest in building and sustaining postsecondary institutions and their programs. That is to say, the progress of Canadian society, to a large degree, is measured by the extent to which Canada’s population obtains postsecondary qualifications.

Below, Table 2 depicts the average income of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples and relates these incomes to educational attainment and gender. A number of points can be drawn from this information. First, Aboriginal men, for the most part, have a higher average income than Aboriginal women; however, the income disparity between genders is less among Aboriginal peoples, as compared to non-Aboriginal peoples. Another point drawn from Table 2 is that among Aboriginal groups, Métis men tend to have the highest average incomes and First Nations men tend to have the lowest. For Aboriginal women, Inuit women tend to have the highest average income, while First Nations women tend to have the lowest incomes. A third, and paramount point exemplified within Table 2 is that men and women's average incomes increase, quite substantially, at two key thresholds: with the completion of high school and with the completion of postsecondary programs. For example, those people with a high school certificate have a higher average income than those people without a high school certificate. Similarly, those people who have attained any type of postsecondary credential (e.g., certificate, diploma or degree) have a higher average income than those people who were enrolled in a postsecondary institute but did not graduate from the program. Therefore, not only is it important that Aboriginal peoples are provided with postsecondary opportunities, but it is essential that support be provided for Aboriginal peoples throughout their program to accentuate program completion.



Table 2

*Average Income (in \$) for Males and Females Reflected by Highest Level of Education, Age, and Identity Groups, Canada, 2000*

<b>Group/ Highest Level of Education</b>	<b>Age 15-24 Male/Female</b>	<b>Age 25-44 Male/Female</b>	<b>Age 44-64 Male/Female</b>	<b>Age 65+ Male/Female</b>	<b>Total 15+ Male/Female</b>
<b>First Nations</b>					
Less than grade 9	4,854 / 5,488	14,289 / 11,488	15,979 / 9,971	17,238 / 14,399	14,317 / 11,175
High school without certificate	5,395 / 5,240	17,903 / 13,859	21,898 / 13,652	18,910 / 14,622	13,708 / 10,611
High school with certificate	10,579 / 8,179	24,078 / 17,545	28,825 / 20,063	22,731 / 15,175	20,819 / 15,174
Postsecondary without certificate	9,991 / 8,730	20,865 / 17,180	24,148 / 17,943	18,309 / 16,202	19,006 / 15,298
Postsecondary with certificate	12,933 / 11,247	27,379 / 23,145	30,948 / 24,367	23,641 / 19,204	27,052 / 22,498
<b>Inuit</b>					
Less than grade 9	5,943 / 6,241	17,211 / 16,013	21,721 / 14,273	21,085 / 15,173	17,865 / 14,179
High school without certificate	6,313 / 6,478	20,526 / 18,531	27,113 / 19,434	*/ *	14,000 / 12,765
High school with certificate	11,341 / 12,371	25,353 / 22,666	34,192 / *	*/ *	20,476 / 19,063
Postsecondary without certificate	11,304 / 10,538	22,353 / 21,269	33,906 / 22,832	*/ *	21,710 / 18,650
Postsecondary with certificate	16,263 / 14,493	31,995 / 29,213	38,036 / 40,585	*/ *	32,073 / 30,260
<b>Métis</b>					
Less than grade 9	5,890 / 5,808	19,150 / 12,929	21,985 / 10,373	18,648 / 14,246	19,642 / 12,157
High school without certificate	8,220 / 5,823	26,747 / 15,917	29,924 / 16,865	24,056 / 15,596	20,855 / 12,701
High school with certificate	13,774 / 8,994	30,078 / 19,391	37,492 / 22,026	25,384 / 18,990	25,910 / 16,826
Postsecondary without certificate	12,552 / 10,396	27,199 / 19,396	30,886 / 22,931	38,497 / 18,824	24,280 / 17,179
Postsecondary with certificate	16,940 / 12,566	36,271 / 25,221	39,108 / 27,072	27,963 / 21,272	35,180 / 24,274
<b>Non-Status Indian</b>					
Less than grade 9	9,526 / 5,367	15,271 / 11,400	19,656 / 10,777	18,356 / 14,615	17,522 / 11,746
High school without certificate	8,008 / 6,143	24,684 / 14,568	26,707 / 15,553	20,352 / 15,508	18,964 / 11,701
High school with certificate	12,908 / 10,048	28,056 / 19,068	32,300 / 20,282	27,313 / 17,519	24,629 / 16,627
Postsecondary without certificate	11,525 / 9,001	29,868 / 18,485	32,245 / 20,127	38,131 / 28,397	25,716 / 16,514
Postsecondary with certificate	16,423 / 13,957	36,244 / 25,654	37,604 / 26,634	30,941 / 27,973	34,700 / 24,822
<b>Non-Aboriginal</b>					
Less than grade 9	10,564 / 7,162	22,515 / 13,705	25,899 / 13,263	21,296 / 15,053	22,721 / 14,249
High school without certificate	7,490 / 5,283	30,511 / 17,944	34,716 / 18,571	27,515 / 17,975	25,531 / 15,581
High school with certificate	12,762 / 8,935	34,994 / 21,682	40,597 / 23,469	31,915 / 20,350	32,041 / 20,363
Postsecondary without certificate	11,179 / 8,775	35,664 / 23,521	44,486 / 26,112	34,643 / 22,610	29,936 / 19,457
Postsecondary with certificate	16,405 / 13,247	47,250 / 30,621	58,002 / 34,448	41,890 / 26,822	48,371 / 29,958

Source: Statistics Canada (2006b; 2006c) / \* income data deleted because of small sample size

### ***Educational Attainment***

For the most part, since enrollment in postsecondary education is dependent upon high school success, it is relevant to discuss the educational status of Aboriginal peoples who are considering postsecondary education. Mendelson (2006) stated 43% of Aboriginal youth do not have a high school diploma. Approximately 50% of First Nations people, aged 25 to 64, living on-reserve and 38% of First Nations people, aged 25 to 64, living off-reserve do not have a high

school diploma (Statistics Canada, 2008d). These rates compare to 15% of Canada's total population, aged 25 to 64, who do not have their high school credentials (Statistics Canada 2008e). A particular deterrent of Aboriginal postsecondary education is highlighted in the fact high numbers of Aboriginal peoples do not complete high school.

Both high school success and postsecondary education are especially important for Aboriginal peoples. Failure to acquire either a high school diploma or postsecondary certification is more strongly linked with unemployment for Aboriginal peoples than it is for non-Aboriginal peoples (Statistics Canada, 1993). A study undertaken for the Saskatchewan Treaty Commissioner confirmed that the financial benefits incurred by improving Aboriginal school attendance, facilities, and participation at postsecondary institutes outweigh costs by at least two to one (Ross & Usher, 1992). The Ontario Native Education Counselling Association (2007) reported that social assistance programs are 20 times more expensive than the cost of a university education. Unequivocally, there are vast social and financial benefits to investing in postsecondary education for Aboriginal peoples.

*Figure 2* depicts the percentage of Aboriginal peoples and non-Aboriginal peoples who have obtained postsecondary certification. As compared to non-Aboriginal peoples, Aboriginal peoples, across all ages, have lower rates of postsecondary certification. Among First Nations and Inuit peoples aged 15-24, less than 10% have a postsecondary certificate. By ages 25-44, the percentage of First Nations and Inuit peoples with postsecondary certification is circa 30%. The figures are similar, but slightly higher for other Aboriginal identity groups. In the 25-44 age group, approximately 39% of Aboriginal peoples (not identified as First Nations or Inuit) have some postsecondary qualification, compared to 53%, the number of non-Aboriginal peoples with

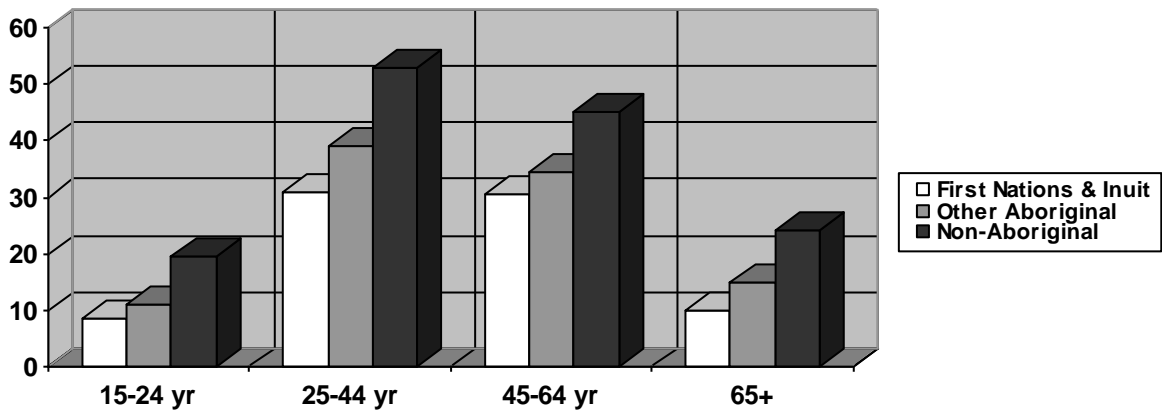
postsecondary qualifications. Also highlighted in *Figure 2* is that the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal postsecondary certification is most prominent within the 25-44 age group.

One message resonating within this information is that non-Aboriginal peoples are supplied with more opportunities and are better equipped for postsecondary success than Aboriginal peoples. This phenomenon is the result of a number of issues. To begin, the language, learning styles, teaching styles, communication modes, and cultural patterns reflected within most postsecondary institutions differ greatly from the traditional teaching pedagogy of Aboriginal peoples (Gorman, 1999). For many Aboriginal peoples, English is not their first language. In 2006, 50% of the Inuit population reported Inuktitut as their mother tongue, while 51% of First Nations people living on a reserve conversed in their Indigenous language (Fitzpatrick, 2008). Few postsecondary institutes provide instruction in an Indigenous language (Hardes, 2006). The relatively low levels of program completion reported throughout the reviewed literature also indicate that the Aboriginal populations face considerable barriers in terms of accessing postsecondary education, as geographically, the concentration of many Aboriginal peoples are in rural or remote areas of Canada (Luffman & Sussman, 2007). Furthermore, numerous studies have indicated that the education Aboriginal peoples received in elementary and high schools did not adequately prepare them for a future in postsecondary education (Hull, Phillips, Polyzoi, 1995; Hull, 2000; Nora & Cabera, 1996; Wells, 1997). Inadequate high school preparation is directly aligned with lack of study skills, program requirements, and academic knowledge, especially in the areas of mathematics and science, thereby preventing students from entering postsecondary institutions (Hardes, 2006).

Although faced with this multitude of barriers, many Aboriginal peoples are succeeding in postsecondary education. In 2006, 14% of Aboriginal peoples had trade credentials and 19%

had a college diploma (Statistics Canada, 2008d). Throughout the past five years, the number of Aboriginal university graduates has grown. In 2001, 6% of Aboriginal peoples had a university degree, as compared to 8% in 2006 (Statistics Canada, 2008d). Similarly, in 2001, 20% of non-Aboriginal peoples had a university degree, as compared to 23% in 2006 (Statistics Canada, 2008d). The good news threaded throughout this information is, although progress is slight and slow, postsecondary qualifications are steadily increasing for Aboriginal peoples.

*Figure 2: Population Percentage with Postsecondary Certificate, by Age & Identified Groups, Canada 2001*



Source: Hull (2005)

### ***Economic and Employment Trends***

In January 2008, Canada's unemployment rate hit a 33-year low of 5.8% (Human Resources and Social Development Canada, 2008). Within the past decade, the focal point of Canada's strong economy has migrated from east to west. While Central Canada is faced with a struggling manufacturing sector (Beauchesne, 2008), Canada's booming natural resource and construction sectors are now positioned in Western Canada, where, as indicated previously,

Aboriginal peoples make up significant portions of the population. In British Columbia, with a spate of transportation, housing, and construction projects linked to preparation for the 2010 Winter Olympics, the province's has a plethora of economic opportunities (Rona Expands, 2007). Alberta is in the midst of the strongest period of economic growth ever recorded by any Canadian province and has been quoted as having the hottest economy in North America (Howland, 2007; Statistics Canada, 2006a). Saskatchewan, in 2008, has led the country in housing starts and authorized building permits (Morgan, 2008). The Saskatchewan potash and uranium sectors have experienced unprecedented global success, and, in early 2008, *PotashCorp* (with its headquarters in Saskatoon) became the most valuable company trading on the Toronto Stock Exchange (Morgan, 2008). Boosted by ongoing construction projects, robust domestic spending and an optimistic outlook for manufacturing, Manitoba's economy is also poised for continued economic growth (Conference Board of Canada, 2008). Sustaining and promoting a strong economy demands knowledgeable management and a skilled workforce, thus verifying the importance of acquiring postsecondary education.

As indicated in Table 3 below, the solid economy of Western Canada is coupled with low unemployment rates. Comparing all provinces, Alberta boasts the lowest unemployment rate of 3.6%, followed by Saskatchewan and Manitoba with respective rates of 4.1% and 4.2%. The strength of the Canadian dollar has negatively impacted Ontario and Quebec's industries. In turn, falling manufacturing exports in central Canada are partially responsible for unemployment rates of 6.4% and 7.5% within Ontario and Quebec. With unemployment rate ranging from 8.2% to 12.5%, the Atlantic Provinces continue to experience the highest unemployment rate in North America (Howland, 2007). In relation to the unemployment rates depicted in Table 2, Aboriginal unemployment rates remain high. With an average unemployment rate of 23.1%, First Nations

people living on reserves represent the highest unemployment rate among Aboriginal peoples (Statistics Canada, 2008c). The Council of Ministers of Education (2002) reported that for many First Nations communities, the unemployment rate exceeds 50%. Due to location, social assistance benefits and seasonal jobs are often the only sources of incomes for people living on reserves, which are predominantly rural or geographically remote. Inuit people also reported a high unemployment rate of 19.0%, while the Métis population had the lowest unemployment rate of 8.4% (Statistics Canada, 2008c).

Postsecondary education can greatly assist in eliminating the employment gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. Specifically, Western Canada's healthy economic landscape provides an opportune time for employers to make lasting connections with the province's young Aboriginal workforce. As stated by John Reid, Saskatchewan's Assistant Deputy Minister of First Nations and Métis People, "Saskatchewan's economy is experiencing many economic opportunities. The Government of Saskatchewan wants to ensure this economic growth is maximized, and First Nations and Métis people benefit" (Melfort Area Strikes Gold, 2008, p. 13). In addition, as more Aboriginal people with postsecondary credentials enter the workforce, a more culturally representative workforce is reflected across Canada.

Because higher education is aligned with greater employment opportunities within Canadian society (Statistics Canada, 1993), postsecondary education for Aboriginal peoples needs to be a current and core focus within government agencies, local businesses, and postsecondary institutions. For example, financial obstacles need to be addressed within government domains. Although the number of First Nations and Inuit students attending postsecondary institution is increasing, the number of First Nations and Inuit students being funded is decreasing. In 1995-96, 27,183 students were funded by Indian and Northern Affairs

Canada, as compared to around 25,000 in 2000-01 (Holmes, 2006). The Assembly of First Nations estimated that more than 8,000 eligible students did not get any funding during the 2000-01 school year (Holmes, 2006). For the 2007-2008 school year, the Ontario Native Education Counselling Association (2007) stated that close to 3,000 Aboriginal students were denied funding for postsecondary education. Lyle Whitefish, Vice Chief of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, commented, “There is a wait list on every reserve of students wanting to continue on past grade 12 and [due to lack of funding] we can’t accommodate them all” (Warnyca, 2008, p. 10). In addition to funding issues, businesses need to better accommodate postsecondary training. The Human Resource Council (2008) reported that business leaders across Canada who understand the case for Aboriginal inclusion in their workforces have started to sponsor training and skills development programs for Aboriginal employees. As more business corporations follow such business savvy and educational incentives, the rate of Aboriginal success in postsecondary education will increase.

Table 3

*Unemployment Rates of Canadian Provinces/Territories, May 2008*

Area	Unemployment Rate
NL	12.5%
PE	9.6%
NS	8.2%
NB	8.9%
QC	7.5%
ON	6.4%
MB	4.2%
SK	4.1%
AB	3.6%
BC	4.5%
YT	4.0%
NT	7.0%
NU	8.5%
Canada	6.1%

Source: Statistics Canada (2008f; 2008g)

### **Concluding Remarks**

Throughout Canada, increased access to and success within postsecondary education are fundamental in order to improve the social and economic conditions of Aboriginal peoples and their communities (Brunnen, 2004; Hill, Hoffman, & Rex, 2005). To alleviate the inequitable social conditions faced by many Aboriginal peoples and to support national and provincial/territorial economic success, the attention, energy, and finances devoted to improving postsecondary education for the Aboriginal populations need to be ranked as a higher priority among Canadian leaders.

Unfortunately, federal and provincial governments are often in conflict as to which department funds Aboriginal education. Thus, the question of who is responsible for the provision of Aboriginal postsecondary education a contentious issue. The federal government claims that postsecondary education clearly falls under the auspices of the provincial government; the provincial government views funding arrangements as a responsibility secured within federal realms (Stonechild, 2006). The sovereign rights of First Nations people and the vital importance of Aboriginal self-leadership in postsecondary education are also incorporated into the question of who should be responsible for the provision of postsecondary education for Aboriginal peoples. As a result of this jurisdictional *gray zone fight* (Wilson, 2007, p. 248), many Aboriginal postsecondary programs are either funded inadequately or are not funded at all. In Ontario during the 2007-2008 school year, Aboriginal postsecondary institutions received as little as \$1,527 per student, as compared to an average of \$9,669 per student in mainstream colleges and universities (Ontario Native Education Counselling Association, 2007).

In order for Aboriginal peoples to be able to overcome the multitude of obstacles which weaken prospects of their educational success, the postsecondary programs, themselves, must be



specialized to conscientiously meet the needs of their peoples. Postsecondary education and training programs need to be innovative, supportive, and empowering for Aboriginal peoples. Aboriginal self-governance in postsecondary institutes is an important component that contributes to the success of postsecondary education for Aboriginal peoples. Fortunately, progress is being made in this area as Aboriginal governments and leaders strive for and promote their autonomy within postsecondary education. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) stated that where Aboriginal peoples have exercised control over their own education, success rates have improved. Furthermore, Aboriginal students who aspire to succeed in postsecondary institutes must be supported by an array of initiatives. For example, successful postsecondary programs include: transitional supports into the programs, the presence of Elders, Aboriginal resources, Aboriginal instructors and staff members, community-based programs, and curricula and pedagogy reflective of Aboriginal cultural beliefs and values. Generous investments of time, money, and effort need to be devoted to existing and new Aboriginal postsecondary programs, thereby improving not only the wellness and prosperity of Aboriginal peoples, themselves, but of the nation of Canada as well.

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