

Educational achievement of young Aboriginal adults

by Heather Tait

The Aboriginal population in Canada is young and growing quickly, and over the next few decades, a large number of young adults will be making the transition from school to work. Given that the labour market demands higher levels of schooling than ever before, obtaining a solid education is becoming increasingly important. A well-educated Aboriginal workforce is essential to meet the requirements of the labour market, and hence reduce high levels of youth unemployment and dependence on social assistance.

In general, the relationship between education and employment is clear: the unemployment rate for young Aboriginal adults without high school was 40% in 1996, compared to 9% for those with a university degree. Over the past decade, Aboriginal people in Canada have made some notable educational gains at both the secondary and postsecondary levels. Further improvements in young Aboriginal peoples' academic qualifications would continue to narrow this differential and so reduce the employment disadvantage faced by groups with lower educational levels. This article explores the educational attainment of young Aboriginal adults aged 20 to 29 in the

1980s and the 1990s, and compares their levels of schooling with those of other young Canadians.

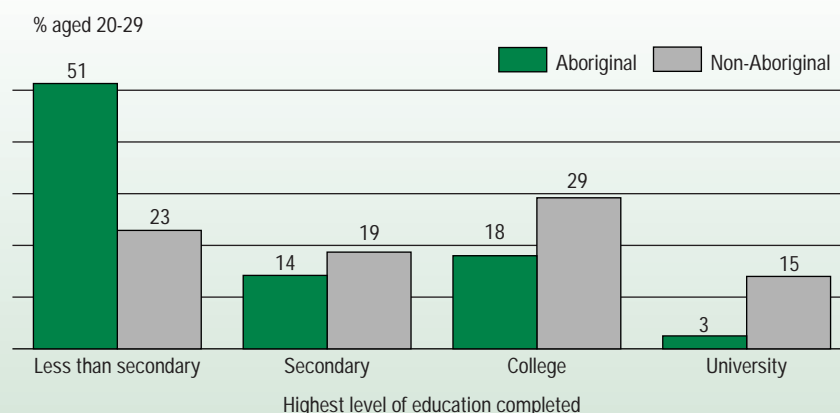
Proportion of college and university grads doubles over past decade

Between 1986 and 1996, young Aboriginal adults improved their qualifications at every level of education. At one end, the proportion of young Aboriginal people (including current students) with less than a high school diploma fell from 60% in 1986 to 45%

in 1996; at the other end, the share of those who completed their college education (refers to all postsecondary, non-university diplomas or certificates) increased from 15% to 20% during the same period. Progress was also evident at the university level: the percentage of those with a degree doubled, from 2% to 4%.

Despite these educational gains, in 1996 there were still large gaps in relative attainment between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people aged 20 to

CST Nearly one in five young Aboriginal adults no longer attending school had completed college in 1996



Source: Statistics Canada, 1996 Census of Population.

29. In fact, the gap widened during the decade for those with less than high school completion. While in 1986, Aboriginal people were 2.2 times more likely than their non-Aboriginal counterparts to have less than high school, by 1996 they were 2.6 times more likely to be without high school completion.

However, the opposite was true at the postsecondary level (including college, university and other post-secondary institutions), where the gap narrowed modestly, indicating a slight improvement in the relative position of Aboriginal people. For example, in 1986, Aboriginal people aged 20 to 29 were 60% less likely than non-Aboriginal people in this age group to have completed their postsecondary studies. By 1996, they were 50% less likely to do so.

The past decade's upward trend in Aboriginal education, however, may not be as significant as the figures suggest. During the 1986 to 1996 period, an increasing number of people, mostly those with North American Indian and Métis background, began to identify with an Aboriginal group, thus raising the total number of people who reported an Aboriginal identity on the Census. Many of these people were relatively well-educated and, as a result, may have helped push upward the average educational attainment of all young Aboriginal adults over the decade.¹

Educational levels rise for both men and women

Although the educational attainment of both young Aboriginal men and women improved between 1986 and 1996, women had a somewhat higher

1. See also Guimond, E., A. Siggner, N. Robitaille and G. Goldmann. "Aboriginal Peoples in Canada: A Demographic Perspective." *Census Monograph Series*. Forthcoming.

Data in this article come from the 1986 and 1996 Censuses of Population and the 1991 Aboriginal Peoples Survey. In the 1986 and 1996 Censuses, two questions may be used to determine the size of the Aboriginal population: one on Aboriginal ethnic origin/ancestry and the other on Aboriginal identity. The 1996 total Aboriginal population estimate (799,010) used in this article is based on the identity question, which asked: "Is this person an Aboriginal person, that is, North American Indian, Métis or Inuit (Eskimo)?" The 1986 total Aboriginal population counts (455,130) were calculated by cross-tabulating data from both the ethnic origin and identity questions included in the questionnaire that year.

The large increase in the Aboriginal population between 1986 and 1996 cannot be completely explained by demographic factors, such as fertility and mortality. One must also consider that a significant number of people who did not report an Aboriginal identity in 1986 did so in 1996, most likely due to heightened awareness of Aboriginal issues. For the most part, the socio-economic characteristics of this new group were generally better than the characteristics of those who had previously identified. This contributed to some of the improvement observed in the socio-economic profile of the Aboriginal population as a whole during this period.

The Aboriginal Peoples Survey (APS) was a large-scale survey conducted as a follow-up to the 1991 Census. Persons who reported Aboriginal ancestry on the census questionnaires were asked in the APS about their identity. Slightly more than one million persons reported at least some Aboriginal ancestry, and just under two-thirds (625,710) self-identified as an Aboriginal person and/or a Registered Indian.

Incompletely enumerated reserves: In both 1986 and 1996, some Indian reserves and settlements were incompletely enumerated. In 1986, 136 reserves and settlements with an estimated population of 44,700 did not take part in the census. In 1996, 77 reserves, with an estimated population of 44,000, did not participate. These people are not included in this article.

School attendance: Because the 1986 Census did not ask about school attendance, 1986 and 1996 data compare highest-level-of-schooling figures for everyone (including students) in the specific age group. When only 1996 data are presented, figures cover only those who were not attending school at the time.

rate of success at most levels. For example, in 1996, the proportion of women, who had completed college was 21% compared with 19% of men. Similarly, a slightly higher share of women had completed their education at the university level.

Lone mothers, in particular, attend school more frequently than one would expect based on their often difficult circumstances. It is often stated

that the responsibility of caring for children may make it more difficult for women to continue their studies, especially in lone-parent families where there is no spouse to help with childcare. However, according to the 1996 Census, Aboriginal lone mothers were more likely than mothers in two-parent families to be attending school. Indeed, some 30% of Aboriginal lone mothers were attending school, most

on a full-time basis. This compared with 20% of Aboriginal women with children in two-parent families. Young Aboriginal mothers in both lone-parent and two-parent families most likely to be attending school had an incomplete postsecondary education.

Education cuts unemployment substantially

Without question, the higher the level of education, the lower the rate of unemployment for young adults who are no longer attending school. In 1996, young Aboriginal adults without a high school diploma reported an unemployment rate of 40%. In contrast, unemployment rates were only half as high for those with secondary (23%) or college (20%) completion. Young Aboriginal people with a university degree recorded the lowest rate, at 9%. The corresponding figures for the non-Aboriginal population aged 20 to 29 showed the same disparities between educational attainment and unemployment, although at considerably lower rates — 20%, 13%, 9% and 5%, respectively.

Métis lead the way in educational achievement

Canada's three broad Aboriginal groups — North American Indians (comprising Registered Indians and non-status Indians), Métis and the Inuit — have notably different levels of schooling, due mostly to their varying historical, economic, social and geographic circumstances. The opportunities available to them in the form of financial help also vary. For instance, Registered Indian and Inuit students are eligible to receive grants from the Postsecondary Student Support Program, which is funded through the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. For the year 1997/98, a budget of \$276 million assisted these students.²

Although most Métis people are not eligible for these grants, young

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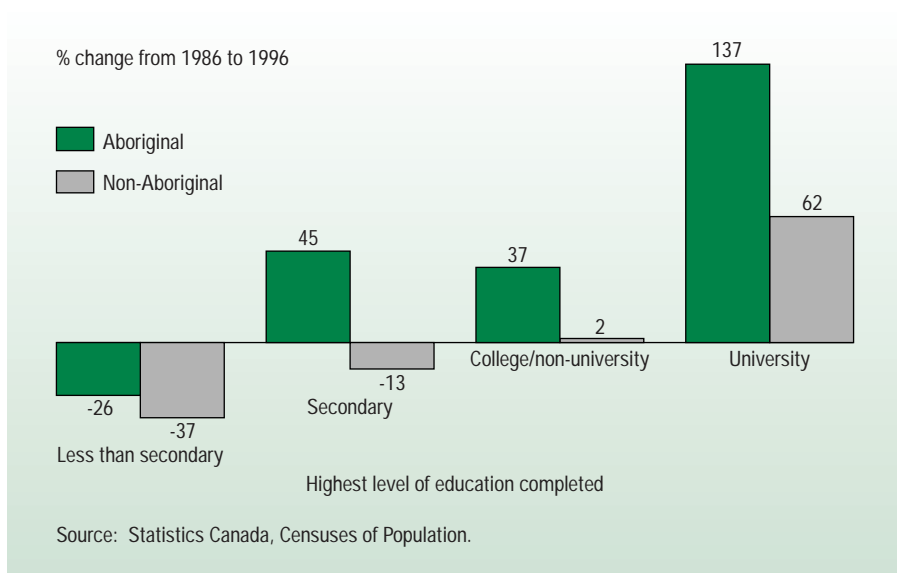
Between 1986 and 1996, both Aboriginal men and women aged 20 to 29 increased their educational attainment

Highest level of schooling completed	Men		Women	
	1986	1996	1986	1996
Less than secondary school	62%	48%	59%	42%
Secondary school	8%	13%	9%	11%
College	14%	19%	15%	21%
University	1%	3%	2%	5%
Incomplete postsecondary	14%	18%	16%	21%
Total number of people	42,110	65,385	46,800	71,595

Source: Statistics Canada, Censuses of Population.

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Between 1986 and 1996, the proportion of young Aboriginal adults with a university degree more than doubled



Source: Statistics Canada, Censuses of Population.

Métis adults had the highest level of education in 1996. Several factors may have contributed to this. First, the Métis are less likely to live in remote communities or the far North than the other two groups, and thus have better access to postsecondary institutions. And second, the Métis have a longer history of formal education and a greater familiarity with other mainstream institutions than other Aboriginal people growing up in remote communities. Indeed, in 1996, some 21% of Métis aged 20 to 29 completed their college education compared with 17% of both North American Indian and Inuit people. Underscoring the same trend, 4% of Métis had university degrees compared with 2% of North American Indians and just under 2% of Inuit in their twenties.

In all three Aboriginal groups, however, those who did complete their postsecondary education tended to choose similar fields of study. The most popular field for all three was engineering and applied science technology, with 39% of Inuit and 27% of both North American Indians and Métis specializing in it. Within this field, the majority of people enrolled in the building technology trades (comprising construction, plumbing, welding and other similar trades). The next most common area of study was commerce, management and business administration, with nearly equal concentrations of North American Indians and Métis (22% and 24%, respectively) and a somewhat lower share of Inuit people (18%).

2. Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. 1998. Post-secondary Student Program Database. Inuit students account for roughly 1% (or 280) of the total number of students in this program.

CST Family and money issues mostly responsible for young people not completing studies

In 1991, the Aboriginal Peoples Survey asked young adults who did not complete their postsecondary studies why they had decided not to continue. The reasons cited most frequently were family related and money issues, followed by a lack of interest or a dislike of school. Interestingly, women and men voiced different concerns. While the top reasons among women were family responsibilities (25%), the most important reasons among men related to money (18%).

However, it appears that with time some Aboriginal people may overcome these barriers. In general, Aboriginal people are more likely than other Canadians to return to school at older ages. The educational level of young Aboriginal adults may therefore improve as they get older.

Those in large cities most likely to hold degrees

Young Aboriginal people living in Canada's largest cities were the most likely to have completed a university degree, while those in rural First Nations communities (commonly referred to as reserves) were the least likely to have done so. And the differences were quite pronounced. For example, in cities with populations over 100,000, approximately 4% of Aboriginal youths had a university degree. This compared with just over 1% of those who lived on rural reserves.

Although pronounced, these disparities are not surprising because opportunities to pursue higher education and find employment tend to be limited in most rural reserves. While some isolated communities have access to satellite campuses, many people are still faced with the prospect of leaving their family, friends, community and way of life and traveling great distances to attend postsecondary institutions. Once enrolled, they are often confronted with unfamiliar surroundings and customs, resulting in feelings of isolation. Others are faced with "thought processes and ways of

knowing and learning that are a lot different than their own traditional ways."³ Students may be discouraged when they find few or, in some cases, no other Aboriginal students and faculty on campus.⁴

Adding to these difficulties is the fact that many reserves are found in remote regions, where jobs are scarce and the land base inadequate. In these situations, people with high levels of formal education may feel obliged to leave their community in order to find employment.

Summary

From 1986 to 1996, there was much improvement in the educational achievement of Aboriginal people aged 20 to 29. While still falling below the levels of other Canadians, at the

3. Wilson, Darryl. 1998. "You Must Learn to Use Words Like Bullets." *Winds of Change*. Winter Issue. Boulder, Colorado, 24-30.

4. The Saskatchewan Indian Federated College. 1994. *Aboriginal Post-secondary Education: Indigenous Student Perceptions*. Report prepared for the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. Ottawa.

On April 1, 1999 Nunavut, Canada's third and newest territory, will become a legal and political reality. The existing Northwest Territories will be split, with Nunavut making up the eastern two-thirds of the area. The creation of the territory will result in various public-sector job opportunities for the Inuit people. One long-term goal is to create roughly 600 new jobs and to have a territorial government that is 85% Inuit (to match the proportion of Inuit persons who comprise the population of Nunavut). As a start, it is hoped that in 1999 the Inuit people will hold about 50% of all government jobs.¹

These new positions require a well-educated workforce, but meeting the labour market demands of Nunavut will be challenging. Not only is there a small population base (24,665 people), but the educational attainment of Inuit in this territory is below that of other Aboriginal people. Nearly half (46%) of the Inuit population 15 years and over had less than grade nine education in 1996 and just over 1% had completed university.

Nunavut's younger adults appear similarly disadvantaged as their educational attainment fell substantially below that of other young Aboriginal people. Some 34% of young Inuit adults aged 20 to 29 had less than grade nine education compared with roughly 12% of other young Aboriginal adults.

At the other end of the scale, slightly more than 1% of Inuit youths had completed university compared with nearly 3% of all young Aboriginal people.

The new administrative structure will require a host of qualified individuals including those with training in human resources, senior government management, land and resource planning and computer technology. To meet the demand for a well-educated workforce, job-training, along with efforts to encourage Inuit children and young adults to stay in school, have become top priorities in recent years.² In 1996, the most common postsecondary qualification held by young Inuit people residing in Nunavut was engineering and applied science technology (32%), with the majority concentrated in fields such as welding, plumbing and construction. Commerce, management and business administration was the second most popular choice (19%), followed by education, recreation, and counseling (14%). In addition, 9% enrolled in science and technology, a field where, because of rapidly changing technology, experienced people are in great demand.

1. Laghi, Brian. July 4, 1998. "Inuit find no magic solution on the way." *Globe and Mail*. p. A6.

2. Ibid.

postsecondary level the educational gap between the two groups has narrowed somewhat over the past decade.

Higher education is one factor which may help Aboriginal people compete in a rapidly changing labour market. More advanced levels of schooling and a narrowing of the education gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people may improve young peoples' chances of finding suitable employment. As well, younger generations of Aboriginal

children may also benefit, by having role models to follow.⁵ These events, in turn, may reduce some of the socioeconomic disparity that continues to exist between Aboriginal people and other Canadians. In addition, a well-educated group of young adults will be better able to contribute to the development of new government

structures and institutions among all Aboriginal people.



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5. See Ponting, J. Rick. and Cora Voyageur. 1998. *An Hundred Points of Light: Grounds for Optimism in the Situation of First Nations in Canada*. Forthcoming.