

First Nations Women and Postsecondary Education in Canada: Snapshots from the Census

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- ^P preliminary
- ^r revised
- X suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the *Statistics Act*
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- * significantly different from reference category ($p < 0.05$)

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Postsecondary education holds widely-recognized benefits for both the individual as well as society. Research has shown that attainment of postsecondary education increases employment and income opportunities and provides a stronger base for communities for economic and other forms of community development. These relationships hold for Aboriginal peoples, just as they do for the population as a whole.

This article explores the postsecondary educational attainment of First Nations women in Canada. While many do not complete high school, there is evidence that Aboriginal peoples return to school later in life and as such, have different pathways to postsecondary education than individuals in the overall Canadian population. This article provides information regarding these and other topics related to postsecondary educational attainment for First Nations women.

The article presents data based on the 2001 and 2006 censuses regarding the postsecondary educational attainment of First Nations women aged 25 to 64, including comparisons between First Nations women and men, as well as between First Nations women and women in the total Canadian population. Variations in First Nations women's postsecondary educational attainment are explored across a number of socio-demographic characteristics such as age, geography, and area of residence (on- versus off-reserve; urban versus rural areas). Also examined are the fields of study most common for First Nations women and the relationship between postsecondary education and employment.

Box 1: Aboriginal Peoples in Canada

There are three groups of Aboriginal peoples in Canada: [North American Indian](#) (hereafter referred to as First Nations people), Métis and Inuit. In 2006, an estimated 698,025 people identified themselves as First Nations people, comprising 60% of the overall Aboriginal population in Canada and 2.2% of the total Canadian population. The First Nations population is a growing segment of the Canadian population – the Census showed that between 1996 and 2006, there was a 29% increase in the First Nations population, which was 3.5 times the growth rate of 8% for the non-Aboriginal population.

Defining the Aboriginal population and comparison groups

There are various ways to define the Aboriginal population based on the four related questions asked in the census (Aboriginal ancestry; Aboriginal identity; member of an Indian Band/First Nation; and Registered or Treaty Indian). This article focuses on the First Nations identity population, and includes people who have self-identified as First Nations people as a single response (that is, not in combination with Inuit or Métis identity). Less than 1% of the Aboriginal identity population reported more than one Aboriginal identity in 2006.

Census data for First Nations people include individuals with and without Registered Indian status, as well as individuals living on and off reserve. Note that there were 30 incompletely enumerated reserves in 2001 and 22 in 2006. This represents an estimated 40,000 persons living on reserve in 2006. Comparisons of Aboriginal data across Census years include only those reserves that participated in both the 2001 and 2006 censuses.

In this article, comparisons are made between First Nations women and First Nations men, as well as First Nations women and the total Canadian population of women. The category 'total Canadian population of women' includes the entire population of women in Canada (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal).

Highest level of educational attainment

The Census asks individuals to report their level of educational attainment. This information can be used to classify the population into six categories of educational attainment:

- Less than high school;
- High school certificate or equivalent;
- Apprenticeship or trades certificate or diploma;
- College, CEGEP [Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel] or other non-university certificate or diploma;
- University certificate or diploma below bachelor level;

- University degree.

Each person is classified according to their [highest level of education completed](#). As such, a certificate, diploma or degree identified in this analysis (such as a trades certificate or a college diploma) refers to the highest accreditation attained by the respondent, according to the order listed above.

Census data do not permit analyses of multiple degrees or studies that did not result in the completion of a postsecondary certificate, diploma or degree. For example, a person holding both a college diploma and a university degree would be counted in the 'University degree' category only. In addition, Census data do not allow for an analysis of individuals who have taken some postsecondary education but who did not complete their program of studies. As such, the education indicator used in this article, the highest level of education attained, should be interpreted with these limitations in mind.

The postsecondary education categories analysed were as follows:

Trades: Encompasses individuals who have an apprenticeship certificate or diploma, or other trades certificate or diploma as the highest level of education they have attained.

College: Encompasses individuals who have a college, CEGEP or other non-university certificate or diploma as the highest level of education they have attained.

University degree: Encompasses people who have a bachelor's degree; a university certificate or diploma above bachelor level; a degree in medicine, dentistry, veterinary medicine or optometry; a master's degree; or an earned doctorate as their highest level of education attained.

Overall postsecondary: Encompasses people who have acquired an apprenticeship or trades certificate; college or CEGEP diploma; university certificate or diploma below bachelor level; university degree at bachelor's degree and above.

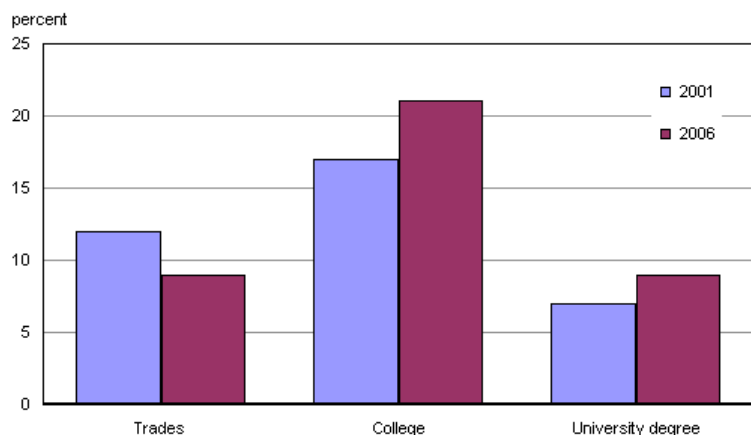
Over four in ten First Nations women completed some form of postsecondary education in 2006

According to the 2006 Census, 44% of First Nations women aged 25 to 64 had completed some form of postsecondary education. Of these graduates, 21% had obtained a college diploma. An additional 9% had a university degree, 9% had a trades certificate, and 5% had a university certificate or diploma below the bachelor's level.

While the proportion of First Nations women with a trades credential decreased between 2001 and 2006, the overall trend indicates that postsecondary educational attainment for First Nations women has increased.

Overall, from 2001 to 2006, the proportion of First Nations women obtaining college credentials increased from 17% to 21% (see Chart 1). In addition, there was a two percentage-point increase, from 7% to 9%, in the proportion obtaining a university degree. On the other hand, the proportion of First Nations women obtaining trades credentials decreased from 12% in 2001 to 9% in 2006.

Chart 1
Proportions of First Nations women aged 25 to 64, by highest level of postsecondary education attained, 2001 and 2006



Source: Statistics Canada, [Census of Population 2001 and 2006](#).

Postsecondary educational attainment on the rise for First Nations women, but the gap when compared to women overall has increased at the university level

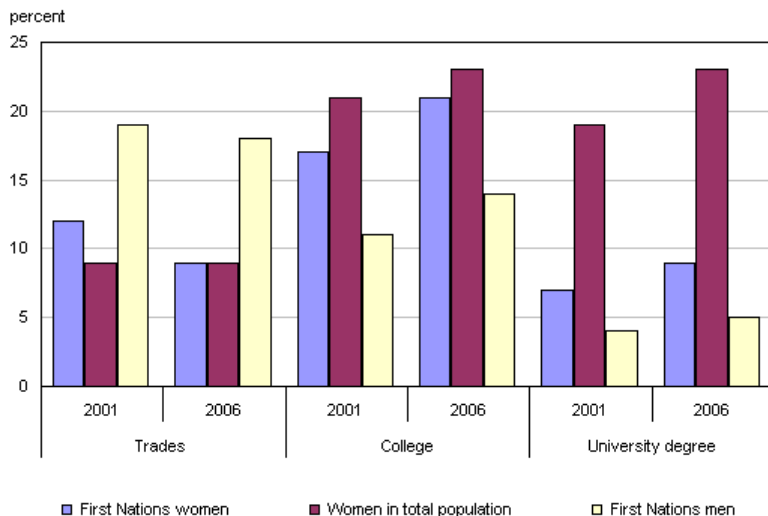
The gap between First Nations women and women in the total Canadian population at the college level narrowed from 2001 to 2006. Chart 2 shows that in 2001, 17% of First Nations women and 21% of women in the overall population had college credentials. By 2006, these proportions were 21% and 23%, respectively, narrowing the gap in attainment of college credentials.

The gaps were most pronounced at the university level. In 2001, there was a 12 percentage-point difference in the proportions with a university degree between First Nations women (7%) and women in the overall population (19%); by 2006, this had increased to a 14 percentage-point difference (9% versus 23%).

Twelve percent of First Nations women and 9% of women in the overall population had trades credentials in 2001; however, by 2006, 9% of both First Nations women and women in the total population had trades credentials.

Chart 2
Proportions of First Nations women, First Nations men, and women in the total Canadian population aged 25 to 64, by highest

level of postsecondary education attained, 2001 and 2006



Source: Statistics Canada, [Census of Population 2001 and 2006](#).

First Nations women were more likely to have college and university credentials than First Nations men

According to the Census, First Nations women were more likely to have college and university credentials than their male counterparts in both 2001 and 2006. In 2006, 21% of First Nations women and 14% of First Nations men had college credentials, while 9% of First Nations women and 5% of First Nations men had university degrees (see Chart 2).

Conversely, a higher percentage of First Nations men had trades credentials in both 2001 and 2006. For example, twice as many First Nations men had trades credentials in 2006 (18%) as compared to First Nations women (9%).

The gaps in educational attainment between First Nations women and men for college and university credentials remained relatively stable from 2001 to 2006. In the trades, however, the gap between First Nations women and men increased over the same time period.

First Nations women and women in the total Canadian population studied in similar fields of study at the trades, college, and university levels

In 2006, the three most common fields of study in the trades for First Nations women were health professions (25%), personal and culinary services (21%), and business (21%). Women with trade credentials in the overall Canadian population studied in the same top three fields as First Nations women (Table 1).

The most common fields of study in the trades for First Nations men were different from those observed among women, with construction trades being the most common (26%), followed by mechanic and repair technologies (17%) and precision production (12%) / transportation and materials moving (12%).

Business was the most common field of study for college graduates among First Nations women (31%), First Nations men (13%), and women in the total population (35%). Health professions, and family and human sciences, were in second and third place for both First Nations women (23% and 10%, respectively) and women in the total population (26% and 5%). The other most common fields of study for First Nations men with a college diploma were engineering technologies (11%), construction trades (11%), and mechanic and repair technologies (11%).

The most common university degree obtained by First Nations women, First Nations men, and women in the total population was in the field of education. This was followed by public administration and social service (13%) and business (8%) / health (8%) / social sciences (8%) for First Nations women university graduates.

Table 1
Proportions of the top three fields of study of First Nations women, First Nations men, and women in the total Canadian population aged 25 to 64, by highest level of postsecondary education attained, Canada, 2006

First Nations women	%	First Nations men	%	Women in the total population	%
Trades certificate					
Health professions and related clinical sciences	25	Construction trades	26	Business, management, marketing and related support services	29
Personal and culinary services	21	Mechanic and repair technologies/technicians	17	Personal and culinary services	26
Business, management, marketing and related support services	21	Precision production	12	Health professions and related clinical sciences	24
...		Transportation and materials moving	12	...	
College diploma					
Business, management, marketing and related support services	31	Business, management, marketing and related support services	13	Business, management, marketing and related support services	35
Health professions and related clinical	23	Engineering technologies/technicians	11	Health professions and related clinical	26

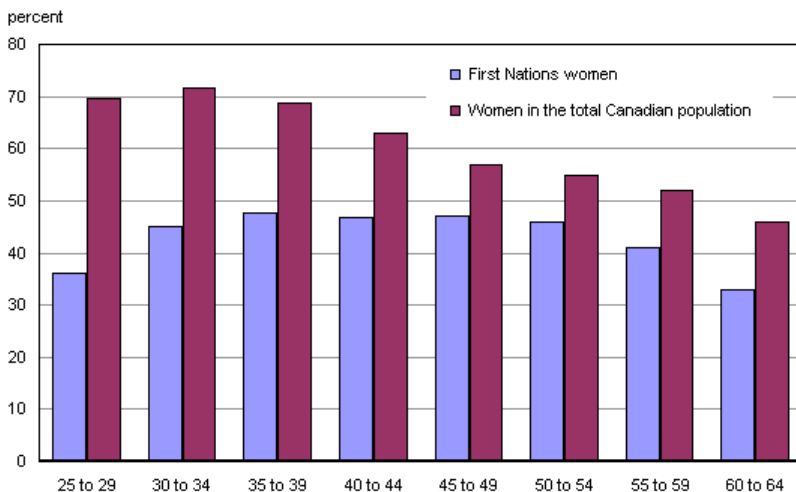
sciences			sciences	
Family and consumer sciences/Human sciences	10	Construction trades	11	Family and consumer sciences/Human sciences
...		Mechanic and repair technologies/technicians	11	...
University degree				
Education	31	Education	18	Education
Public administration and social service professions	13	Business, management, marketing and related support services	13	Business, management, marketing and related support services
Business, management, marketing and related support services	8	Social sciences	10	Health professions and related clinical sciences
Health professions and related clinical sciences	8
Social sciences	8
... not applicable				
Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population 2006 .				

First Nations women obtain college credentials later in life

In 2006, the proportion of First Nations women with a postsecondary education was highest among those aged 35 to 39 (48%), whereas for women in the overall Canadian population, this proportion was highest for adults aged 30 to 34 (72%) (see Chart 3).

Also, there were proportionately more First Nations women with a postsecondary education among the older age groups (35 to 39 to 50 to 54 year olds) than among the younger age groups (25 to 29 and 30 to 34 year olds). This pattern was not found among women in the overall Canadian population, where younger adults were more highly educated than their older counterparts.

Chart 3
Proportions of First Nations women and women in the total Canadian population aged 25 to 64 with postsecondary education, by age groups, 2006



Source: Statistics Canada, [Census of Population 2006](#).

These data suggest that more First Nations women may defer their postsecondary studies until later in life compared to women in the total Canadian population.

To further examine this, the educational attainment of five different cohorts of women was observed at two points in time: in 2001 and five years later, in 2006. Since the Census is not longitudinal, this comparison does not follow the same group of women over time; however, it can provide a picture of the average experience for women in a particular [cohort](#). The five cohorts that were examined were: women aged 25 to 29 in 2001 and 30 to 34 in 2006 (Cohort 1); women aged 30 to 34 in 2001 and 35 to 39 in 2006 (Cohort 2); women aged 35 to 39 in 2001 and 40 to 44 in 2006 (Cohort 3); women aged 40 to 44 in 2001 and 45 to 49 in 2006 (Cohort 4); and women aged 45 to 49 in 2001 and 50 to 54 in 2006 (Cohort 5).

Table 2 shows the proportions of women with trades, college, and university credentials in each of these cohorts for both First Nations women and women in the total population. Relative to women overall, the First Nations women cohorts of 25 to 29, 30 to 34, and 35 to 39 years old experienced notable gains in the proportion of college diploma completions between 2001 and 2006.

For instance, in 2001, 16% of First Nations women aged 25 to 29 (Cohort 1) had college credentials, and by 2006 this proportion had increased to 23%. This compares to a one percentage-point increase (24% to 25%) for women overall in the same cohort. Similarly, the proportion of First Nations women in Cohort 2 (aged 30 to 34) with a college diploma increased from 19% in 2001 to 23% in 2006; this compares to a one-percentage-point increase (24% to 25%) for women overall in the same cohort. As for First Nations women in Cohort 3 (aged 35 to 39), the proportion with a college diploma increased from 19% to 23%, while these proportions went from 24% to 25% among women overall in the same cohort. This shows that First Nations women obtain college credentials later in life relative to women overall. ⁴

Table 2
Proportions with trades, college, and university credentials, First Nations women and women in the total Canadian population, by age cohorts, 2001 and 2006

		Cohort 1	
		25 to 29 years old in 2001	30 to 34 years old in 2006
		percent	
Trades	First Nations women	9	9
	Women in total population	9	8
College	First Nations women	16	23
	Women in total population	24	25
University degree	First Nations women	7	9
	Women in total population	29	33
		Cohort 2	
		30 to 34 years old in 2001	35 to 39 years old in 2006
		percent	
Trades	First Nations women	11	10
	Women in total population	10	9
College	First Nations women	19	23
	Women in total population	24	25
University degree	First Nations women	7	10
	Women in total population	26	29
		Cohort 3	
		35 to 39 years old in 2001	40 to 44 years old in 2006
		percent	
Trades	First Nations women	13	10
	Women in total population	10	10
College	First Nations women	19	23
	Women in total population	24	25
University degree	First Nations women	7	9
	Women in total population	21	23
		Cohort 4	
		40 to 44 years old in 2001	45 to 49 years old in 2006
		percent	
Trades	First Nations women	13	11
	Women in total population	10	9
College	First Nations women	20	21
	Women in total population	22	23
University degree	First Nations women	7	9
	Women in total population	18	19
		Cohort 5	
		45 to 49 years old in 2001	50 to 54 years old in 2006
		percent	
Trades	First Nations women	11	9
	Women in total population	9	9
College	First Nations women	18	20
	Women in total population	20	21
University degree	First Nations women	9	11
	Women in total population	18	19

Source: Statistics Canada, [Census of Population 2001 and 2006](#).

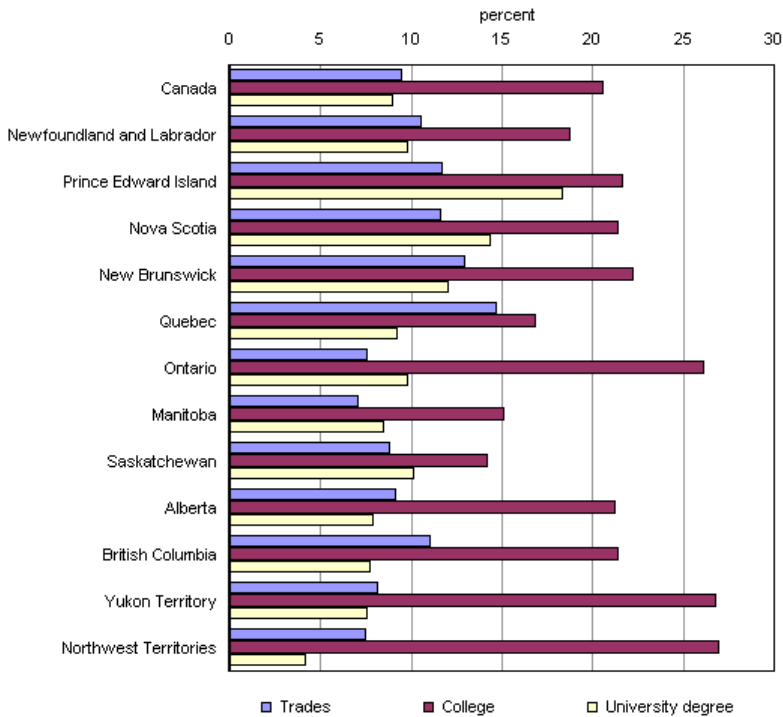
Yukon, the Northwest Territories, and Ontario had the highest proportions of First Nations women who were college graduates

Many factors contribute to differences in postsecondary educational attainment across regions. While it is beyond the scope of this article to examine all of these factors in detail, a few potential factors that may explain these variations include (but are not limited to): geographic location of First Nations people, geographic location of postsecondary institutions, availability and types of programs, as well as the nature of labour markets in each region.

In 2006, Yukon, the Northwest Territories, and Ontario had the highest proportions of First Nations women aged 25 to 64 who were college graduates, at just over 25%, while Quebec was the province with the highest proportion of First Nations women with trades credentials (15%) (Chart 4).

First Nations women in Prince Edward Island (18%), Nova Scotia (14%), and New Brunswick (12%) were most likely to have a university degree, whereas First Nations women in the Northwest Territories were least likely to do so (4%).

Chart 4 Proportions of First Nations women aged 25 to 64, by highest level of postsecondary education attained, Canada, provinces, and territories, 2006



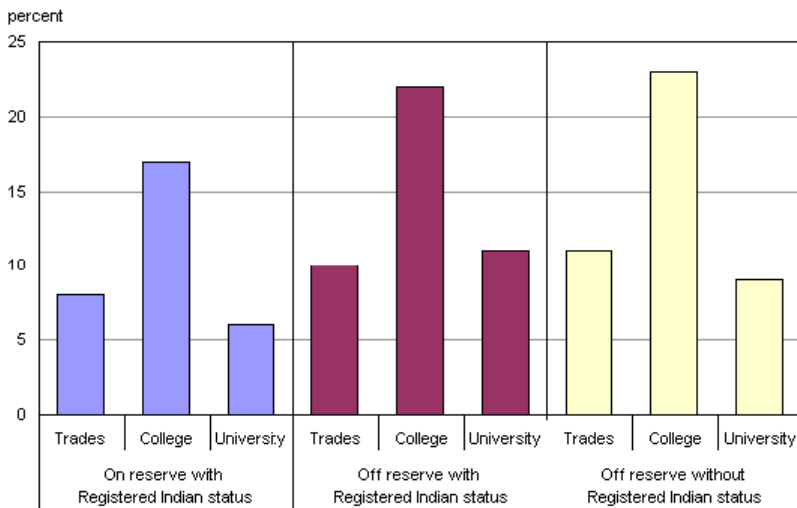
Note: The number of First Nations women aged 25 to 64 in Nunavut was too small to be analysed.

Source: Statistics Canada, [Census of Population 2006](#).

First Nations women living off reserve were more likely to have postsecondary credentials than those living on reserve

Chart 5 shows the percentage of First Nations women who lived on and off reserve at the time of the 2006 Census who had trade, college or university credentials. The off-reserve data are examined by whether or not First Nations women reported having [Registered Indian status](#).

Chart 5
Proportions of First Nations women aged 25 to 64 living on and off reserve, by Registered Indian status and by highest level of postsecondary education attained, 2006



Source: Statistics Canada, [Census of Population 2006](#).

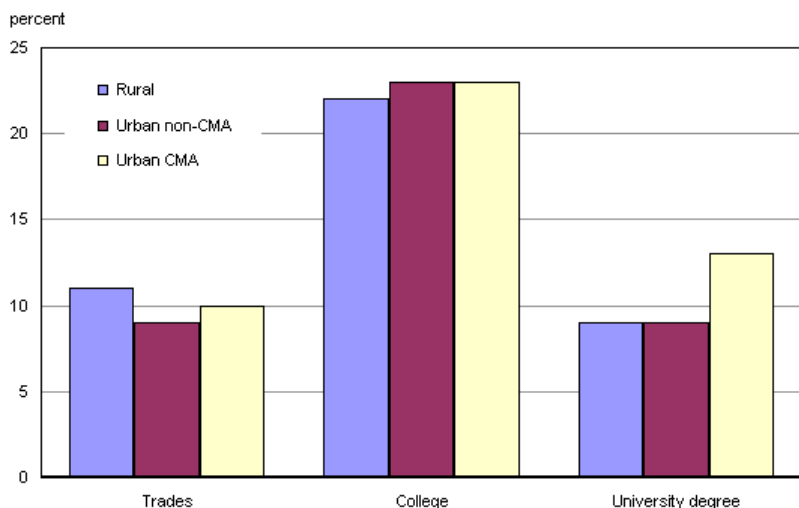
According to these data, First Nations women living on reserve were less likely than First Nations women living off reserve (both with and without Registered Indian status) to be trades, college or university graduates. The gap between First Nations women living on and off reserve was larger at the university level. For example, 11% of off-reserve women who were Registered Indians had a university degree compared to 6% of their counterparts living on reserve.

Off reserve, slightly more First Nations women who were Registered Indians had a university degree (11%) as compared to their counterparts who were not Registered Indians (9%).

First Nations women living in large urban areas were more likely to have a university degree than those living in rural or smaller urban areas

Chart 6 shows the postsecondary educational attainment of First Nations women who lived in (off-reserve) rural and urban areas at the time of the 2006 Census. Urban areas have been broken down into [Census metropolitan areas \(CMA\)](#) which will be referred to as large urban areas and [non-CMA](#) (non-CMA) which will be referred to as small urban areas.

Chart 6
Proportions of (off-reserve) First Nations women aged 25 to 64 living in rural, urban non-CMA, and urban CMA areas, by highest level of postsecondary education attained, 2006



Source: Statistics Canada, [Census of Population 2006](#).

In 2006, a higher proportion of First Nations women living in large urban areas had a university degree (13%) as compared to their counterparts who lived in smaller urban and rural areas (9% in both cases) – a finding that was also observed in the overall Canadian population. Urban and rural communities were more alike in terms of the proportions of First Nations women with trades and college credentials.

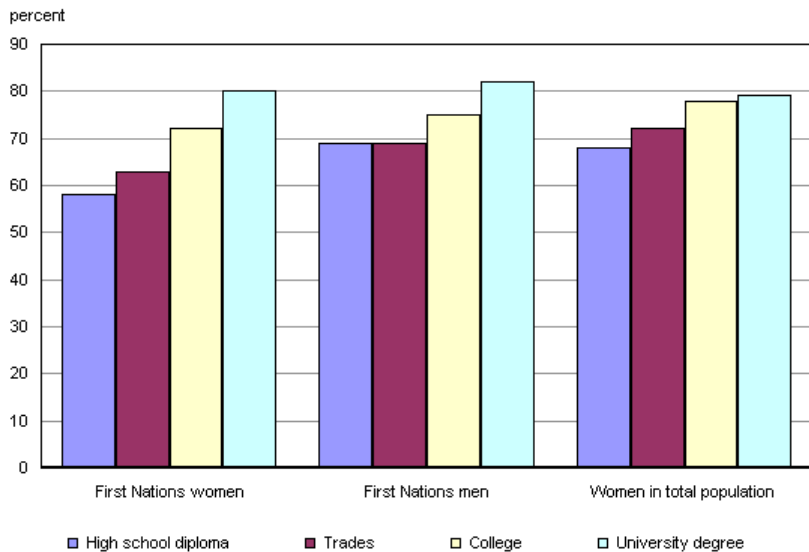
Postsecondary education associated with employment

Chart 7 shows the relationship between [employment rates](#) and highest level of education attained (i.e., high school, trades, college or university degree) among First Nations women, First Nations men, and women in the total Canadian population.

There is a strong relationship between postsecondary education and employment rates. According to the 2006 Census, the employment rate for First Nations women with a high school diploma was 58%, compared to 63% for those with trade credentials, 72% for women with a college diploma, and 80% for those with a university degree.

Overall, there is little difference in the employment rates of First Nations women, First Nations men, and women in the total population once education at the college and university levels is taken into account. However, First Nations women with high school as their highest level of education appear to face a disadvantage in the labour market when compared to First Nations men and women overall with the same level of education (with employment rates of 58%, 69% and 68%, respectively). This is also the case when comparing the employment rate for First Nations women and women overall with trades credentials (63% and 72%, respectively).

Chart 7
Employment rates by highest level of education attained, First Nations women, First Nations men, and women in the total Canadian population aged 25 to 64, 2006



Source: Statistics Canada, [Census of Population 2006](#).

Conclusion

Further research is needed to fully understand the complex relationship between education and labour market outcomes for First Nations women. Future research could investigate whether First Nations women with postsecondary education are employed in temporary or permanent jobs, full- or part-time jobs; whether their employment incomes are similar to those of First Nations men and women overall with the same educational levels; or whether First Nations women are employed in the fields in which they have been trained.

Future research could also usefully explore the reasons why First Nations women tend to obtain college credentials later in life. Data from the 2006 Census shows that First Nations children tend to be raised by younger parents than non-Aboriginal children.⁶ Future research could explore how early childbearing may affect the path to postsecondary education for young First Nations women.

Notes

1. Hull, J. 2005. Post-secondary education and labour market outcomes: Canada, 2001. Ottawa: Indian and Northern Affairs Canada.
2. See Hull, J. 2006. Aboriginal youth in the Canadian labour market. Research and Analysis Directorate. Ottawa: Indian and Northern Affairs Canada; Clement, J. 2009. "University attainment of the Registered Indian population, 1981-2006: A cohort approach" in White, J.P., J. Peters., D. Beavon, and N. Spence. (Eds), *Aboriginal Education: Current Crisis and Future Alternatives*. Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing; see also Vaillancourt, C. 2005. [Manitoba postsecondary graduates from the Class of 2000: how did they fare?](#) Statistics Canada Catalogue number 81-595-MIE — No. 029.
3. [Aboriginal Peoples in Canada in 2006: Inuit, Métis and First Nations, 2006 Census](#). Statistics Canada Catalogue number 97-558-XIE.
4. Research by the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation has also shown that Aboriginal university and college students are, on average, older than mainstream students and more likely to be married or to have children. See Holmes, D. 2005. *Embracing Differences: Post-secondary Education among Aboriginal Students, Students with Children and Students with Disabilities*. Millennium Research Series Number 18. Montreal: Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation.
5. [Educational Portrait of Canada. 2006 Census](#). Statistics Canada Catalogue number 97-560-X.
6. [Aboriginal Children's Survey, 2006: Family, Community and Child Care](#). Statistics Canada Catalogue number 89-634-X - No. 001.