

Knowledge Synthesis: Aboriginal Workplace Integration in the North

Theme: Knowledge and Learning Outcomes

Subtheme: Leading Educational Approaches and Models

Submitted to Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council

October 30, 2015

*Heather Hall and Hayley Hesseln
with Ken Coates*

International Centre for Governance and Development
University of Saskatchewan

This page intentionally left blank

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the research staff and students at ICNGD who provided us with their time and assistance throughout this project: Emmy Stravostand-Neuls, Joelena Leader, Paola Chiste, Stan Yu, Dazaway Landrie-Parker, Osemis Bear and Riley Braun. We would all like to thank Greg Finnegan for preparing the Labour Market & Demographic Profiles. Finally, thank you to all the regional stakeholders who shared their time and expertise with us.

Key Messages

This knowledge synthesis identifies common barriers to skills training across the North, and best practices used to meet skills training, education and labour market development challenges. Our hope is that this shared knowledge from across the North will help stakeholders adopt and adapt successful approaches and strategies for the future. We reviewed the academic and grey literature on Aboriginal skills training, education and workforce development and talked with key stakeholders in northern Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Ontario and the Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut. Our findings revealed a number of key themes:

Theme 1: What has changed over the last two decades?

The barriers and best practices identified in this report are largely consistent across all jurisdictions and widely known. Our findings also suggest that the same challenges and best practices have existed since the 1990s. Change has been slow because of weak collaboration, systemic issues regarding policy and funding, and the failure to take a holistic approach to addressing challenges and solving problems especially with regards to Aboriginal education.

Theme 2: It all starts with early childhood and K-12 education

Research has shown that barriers to education and labour market development begin to arise in early childhood and have cumulative effects throughout adolescence and into adulthood. To successfully prepare adults for the workforce, changes are required in early childhood education to stimulate learning and the desire to learn by crafting culturally relevant programming and delivery methods, and by providing quality education in communities.

Theme 3: Putting people before politics

As the Canadian Chamber of Commerce (2013: 16) argued: “training programs that come and go may be politically expedient but do not meet the Aboriginal peoples’ and employers’ needs.” One of the most important findings from this research is that successful skills training and employment outcomes require a holistic approach that fully supports the learner, their families and their communities. This requires a long-term approach versus the current suite of short-term project-based approaches.

Theme 4: Breaking down the policy silos

We heard repeatedly that all systems required to deliver successful skills training are out of sync: programs are short-term, funding is temporary, policies are misaligned with outcomes, and not always do key stakeholders participate. Educational policy is directly related to health and wellness, health and wellness influences the ability and desire to learn, skills acquired through educational opportunities are meaningless without employment and economic development. All pieces of the puzzle must be addressed, collectively and in meaningful partnerships if change is to occur.

Executive Summary

For many years, governments, industry and Aboriginal communities have invested heavily in workforce training, professional development and upgrading, and employment-based skills preparation, with the shared goal of encouraging greater Aboriginal participation in the market economy. Across the North a significant challenge is overcoming the disconnect between northern opportunities and the Aboriginal labour force, a problem that has been compounded in recent years by the shift to fly-in labour, increasing immigration, and the rapid expansion of the northern Aboriginal population.

A large body of academic literature has linked disparities experienced by Aboriginal populations to social, economic and political inequities (see Adelson 2005, and Lemstra et al. 2006). Aboriginal peoples in Canada have long advocated for interventions that focus on enhancing educational achievement and labour market participation as a strategy to reduce and eliminate disparities. The federal government, provincial/territorial governments, industry and postsecondary institutions have responded through various programming streams to enhance Aboriginal education, skills training and workforce development. Despite numerous studies, program reviews and institutional evaluations, there still remain significant and pervasive barriers to skills development.

This project was designed to accomplish four goals: (1) to summarize the state of the scholarly and professional literature on Aboriginal education, workforce development, skills training and regional employment strategies relevant to the North; (2) to identify the insights gleaned about the education and training of Aboriginal northerners in order to better inform the policy discussions underway in the Canadian North; (3) to consult with current northern policy makers and administrators to identify the research papers and analytical works that underpin contemporary practice in the field; and (4) to share the results of the analysis with northern policy makers and administrators to inform regional education, workplace development, skills training and Aboriginal/regional employment strategies with an ambition to improving outcomes.

Research was conducted in three phases: (1) an initial scan of the academic and grey literature on Aboriginal skills training programs, education and workforce development programs; (2) a jurisdictional scan of government, industry and Aboriginal-led programs in our six case study regions: Northern Ontario, Northern Manitoba, Northern Saskatchewan, the Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut; and (3) discussions with representatives from government, industry, education and Aboriginal organizations who are engaged with skills training, education and/or workforce development programs to “ground truth” our findings. We met with over 59 stakeholders who were instrumental in identifying gaps, trends, and scholarly and professional analyses that have shaped current programming in the Canadian North.

What we discovered

While little critical academic literature exists on Aboriginal skills training and workforce development, strategies there is a growing body of government and non-government-authored reports and studies. This literature, in conjunction with stakeholder interviews representatives from government, industry, education and Aboriginal organizations revealed a number of barriers and challenges to skills training and workforce development:

- Socio-economic issues (e.g. child care, addictions, housing, transportation, racism, and justice) and support;
- Lack of essential skills and educational attainment (e.g. reading, numeracy, document use, writing, computer use, communication, collaboration/teamwork, critical thinking, problem solving, English language skills, and continuous learning);
- Inadequate programs and content (e.g. funding, delivery and availability, structure and design, access, and content);
- Lack of collaboration among stakeholders (e.g. government, industry, educational institutions, and service providers);
- Systemic issues (e.g. disincentives, lack of employment opportunities, union regulations, apprenticeship opportunities, and financial barriers).

On the other hand, many practices have proven to be successful, particularly when combined and used over time. In most cases, best practices have arisen as a direct result of addressing challenges and barriers. Problem solving also requires unique approaches to the myriad of situations occurring across different jurisdictions. Best practices largely run parallel to barriers and challenges and are categorized as follows:

- Provide social supports to complement program delivery;
- Focus on essential skills training and bridging programs;
- Deliver community-based and/engaged programming;
- Use approaches to deliver culturally appropriate material in a manner consistent with learner styles;
- Engage in stronger collaboration and coordination among stakeholders with a focus on long-term partnerships; and
- Pursue systemic changes to policy and regulations that provide more flexibility, accountability and opportunities.

One of the objectives in this Knowledge Synthesis was to consult with current northern policy makers and administrators to identify the research papers and analytical works that underpin contemporary practice in the field. In discussing this research with representatives from industry, government, education and Aboriginal organizations we discovered that most organizations had performed jurisdictional scans of programs and best practices from across the country.

However, program decisions were largely based on the place-based needs and the feasibility of implementation in their particular region.

This Knowledge Synthesis revealed four key themes:

Theme 1: What has changed over the last two decades?

The barriers and best practices identified in this report are largely consistent across all jurisdictions and widely known. Our findings also suggest that the same challenges and best practices have existed since the 1990s. Change has been slow because of weak collaboration, systemic issues regarding policy and funding, and the failure to take a holistic approach to addressing challenges and solving problems especially with regards to Aboriginal education.

Theme 2: It all starts with early childhood and K-12 education

Research has shown that barriers to education and labour market development begin to arise in early childhood and have cumulative effects throughout adolescence and into adulthood. To successfully prepare adults for the workforce, changes are required in early childhood education to stimulate learning and the desire to learn by crafting culturally relevant programming and delivery methods, and by providing quality education in communities.

Theme 3: Putting people before politics

As the Canadian Chamber of Commerce (2013: 16) argued: “training programs that come and go may be politically expedient but do not meet the Aboriginal peoples’ and employers’ needs.” One of the most important findings from this research is that successful skills training and employment outcomes require a holistic approach that fully supports the learner, their families and their communities. This requires a long-term approach versus the current suite of short-term project-based approaches.

Theme 4: Breaking down the policy silos

We heard repeatedly that all systems required to deliver successful skills training are out of sync: programs are short-term, funding is temporary, policies are misaligned with outcomes, and not always do key stakeholders participate. Educational policy is directly related to health and wellness, health and wellness influences the ability and desire to learn, skills acquired through educational opportunities are meaningless without employment and economic development. All pieces of the puzzle must be addressed, collectively and in meaningful partnerships if change is to occur.