Redefining the Road to Reconciliation:
Considerations for Renewing Indigenous-Crown Relationship through the Post-Secondary Student Support Program

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Introduction

Created in 1977, the Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP) improves the employability of eligible Treaty/Status First Nation and Inuit students by providing them with funding to access education and skills development opportunities at the post-secondary level.[1] The PSSSP is coordinated within the Education and Social Development Programs and Partnerships sector of Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), and is administered by the First Nation or Inuit designated organisation that determines the funding and selection criteria in accordance with INAC's guidelines.

While the Government of Canada takes a step toward sufficient, predictable and sustained fiscal relationship by committing to lift the 2% cap on annual funding increase to First Nation programs,[2] the government's role in addressing the need of awareness about access to available resources for post-secondary education programs to Indigenous peoples both on and off-reserve can be strengthened. This essay underlines the barriers to accessing post-secondary education, proposes key considerations that respond to the existing barriers, and concludes with forward-thinking steps to support the renewal of an Indigenous-Crown relationship.

Contextualising Reconciliation through Indigenous Education

In response to the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP),[3] the Department of Justice published *Principles respecting the Government of Canada's relationship with Indigenous peoples*, acknowledging that the implementation of the UNDRIP requires transformative change and that reconciliation is an ongoing process in the context of evolving Indigenous-Crown relationships.[4] The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) released its final report calling upon educational institutions to educate for reconciliation.[5] These calls to action reinforce the need to effectively implement reconciliation processes from the high-level formulation of strategic goals to the minute calibrations of operationalising program and service delivery in the Canadian policymaking process.

Education is a predictor of long-term success, socio-economic earning potential and the ability of First Nations to be significant contributors to their families and communities.[6] The Assembly of First Nations (AFN) envisions that post-secondary education be financed in an equitable

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[1] Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada. 2012. *Summative Evaluation of the Post-secondary Education Program. Project Number: 1570-7/09058.* Retrieved via: http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1365456454696/1365456526014 (2012, 2)

[2] Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada. 2017. *Budget 2017 Highlights – Indigenous and Northern Investments.* Budget 2017. Retrieved via: https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1490379083439/1490379208921

[3] Article 21 stipulates that Indigenous peoples have "the right, without discrimination, to the improvement of their economic and social conditions, including, inter alia, in the areas of education, employment, vocational training and retraining, housing, sanitation, health and social security" (United Nations General Assembly 2007)

[4] Department of Justice. 2017. *Principles respecting the Government of Canada's relationship with Indigenous peoples.* Retrieved via: http://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/csj-sjc/principles-principes.html

[5] Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. 2015. *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action.* (2017; s 62, s 65)

[6] Assembly of First Nations. 2010. *Taking Action for First Nations Post-Secondary Education: Access, Opportunity, and Outcomes. Discussion Paper.* (2010, 8)

manner, and protected by a statutory mandate by the federal government to ensure capacity building and accountability.[7] The AFN reviewed the educational attainment of First Nations post-secondary education, noting that 61% of First Nations on reserve did not receive a high school diploma, as compared to 13% of their non-Indigenous counterparts. Only 4% of First Nations received a university degree, as compared to 23% of the Canadian population.[8] The AFN reports that the overall gap in post-secondary education between First Nations and non-Indigenous peoples is related to the wide gap in university attainment.[9] There is a broad range of financial and non-financial disincentives that hinder enrolment and retention in post-secondary education[10], in which the most recurrent include:

- *Inadequate financial assistance:* The lack of adequate and sustainable funding is a prominent disincentive for eligible students on and off-reserve. This barrier places First Nations in a position to determine *priority* students as opposed to supporting qualified and eligible students for funding.[11]

- *Academic disadvantage:* The lack of academic qualifications and the significant linguistic disadvantage with regard to the acquisition of academic or Standard English and/or French remain paramount due to the lack of awareness about available educational and professional development resources, and, in large part, to the federal educational structure that caused institutional marginalisation for speaking Indigenous languages in schools during the colonial period.[12]

- *Geographical barrier:* Remoteness of rural and Northern communities constitute a geographical barrier that imposes significant travel and accommodation costs, and hinder eligible students from living in their community and accessing professional development supports.[13]

A combination of these issues led to the decline of number of eligible funding through the PSSSP, from 22, 938 in 1997 to 18,729 in 2009.[14] The next section addresses key considerations to supporting a renewed Indigenous-Crown relationship through the Post-secondary Student Support Program.

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[7] Assembly of First Nations. 2010. *Taking Action for First Nations Post-Secondary Education: Access, Opportunity, and Outcomes. Discussion Paper.* (2010, 8)

[8] Carr-Stewart, S., G. Balzer, and M. Cottrell. 2013. "First Nations Post-Secondary Education in Western Canada: Obligations, Barriers, and Opportunities." *The morning watch: Education and social analysis, Indigenizing Academy.* (2013, 29)

[9] Assembly of First Nations. 2011. *Post-Secondary Education Fact Sheet – Assembly of First Nations.* Retrieved via: www.afn.ca/uploads/files/education/22._2011_afn_pse_fact_sheet.pdf

[10] Statistics Canada. 2015. *Aboriginal Statistics at a Glance: Second Edition.* Retrieved: www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-645-x/2015001/education-eng.htm

[11] Assembly of First Nations. 2012. *Post-Secondary Education Facts.* Chiefs of Assembly on Education. Retrieved via: http://www.afn.ca/uploads/files/events/fact_sheet-ccoe-12.pdf

[12] Farr, M., L, Seloni, and J. Song. 2010. *Ethnolinguistic diversity and education: Language, literacy and culture.* New York: Routledge. (2010, 88)

[13] Richardson, C., and N. Blanchet-Cohen. 2000. "Postsecondary education programs for Aboriginal Peoples: Achievements and issues." *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 24 (2): 169–184.

[14] Assembly of First Nations. 2011. *Post-Secondary Education Fact Sheet – Assembly of First Nations.* Retrieved via: www.afn.ca/uploads/files/education/22._2011_afn_pse_fact_sheet.pdf (2011, 3)

Considerations to Move Forward

Consideration: Allow PSSSP applications and funding disbursements to be valid for the duration of the student's post-secondary program.

Budget 2017 proposes to increase PSSSP funding by $90 million, which supports over 4,600 students for two years.[15] As the Department commits to increasing funding flexibility to PSSSP, it presents an ongoing difficulty to predict the outcome of student retention and educational attainment. PSSSP funding is limited; not all eligible students are funded as applications are valid for one school year only. This one-year restriction prevents eligible students from receiving adequate funding to complete their post-secondary program, which simultaneously poses a motivational disincentive to continue with their desired interests. Co-designing a program mechanism with Indigenous organisations in which students can track progress at the end of each term to guarantee funding disbursement for the following term will support the development of accountability between band recipients and INAC, and also between band recipients and its students.

Consideration: Create a Post-Secondary Education Liaison Officer position as the primary connection between the student, the post-secondary program, the band recipient and INAC.

This consideration would recognise the role of a liaison officer in First Nation communities by bridging the gap between the key actors to facilitate student awareness of available resources, enrolment, retention, and completion rates of post-secondary programs.[16] The liaison officer will act as an advisor and technical support person for eligible Indigenous students.[17] This consideration can benefit former post-secondary alumna by means of mentoring prospective and/or current students. While this option creates a supportive link between the administrative bodies, it is also important to note that this option can lead to the re-allocation of funding for the administration of PSSSP.

Consideration: Develop a national e-learning platform for digital information sharing with rural and Northern communities.

Communication is a critical tool to access information and available resources for education and professional development, particularly in rural and Northern communities. In order to reach remote communities, developing a pan-Canadian e-learning platform in which innovative ideas on expanding educational knowledge on program design tools can be diffused to different communities accordingly. This consideration creates nation-to-nation and intra-governmental linkages made between First Nations, education institutions and organisations in order to facilitate student transition and support.[18] This option, furthermore, creates a focus on student

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[15] Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada. 2017. *Budget 2017 Highlights – Indigenous and Northern Investments.* Budget 2017. Retrieved via: https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1490379083439/1490379208921

[16] Assembly of First Nations (2010, 21)

[17] *Ibid.*

[18] Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada. 2012. Summative Evaluation of the Post-secondary Education Program. Project Number: 1570-7/09058. Retrieved via: http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1365456454696/1365456526014

support networks that allow for integration of community knowledge, Elder support, and spiritual and traditional teachings that most mainstream organisations do not.[19]

Consideration: Apply Comprehensive Community Planning model to monitor realignment of the Department's strategic goals with the desired and targeted outcomes of Indigenous peoples.

A recent report from Canada's Auditor-General reveals that public servants tend to run programs in ways that solely meet internal goals, as opposed to supporting the people that the Department is meant to serve.[20] Budget 2017 proposes that Canada will undertake a comprehensive and collaborative review of Indigenous partners that support Indigenous students wishing to pursue post-secondary education.[21] INAC's regional office in British Columbia enables communities to establish a vision for its future by partnering with First Nations to incorporate outside principles and Indigenous worldviews to carry forward a strategic plan for the community.[22] This approach speaks to the First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model[23] that highlights a relationship that is holistic, cumulative and interactive. This model can be applied in anticipation of the departmental review by developing a community-led planning approach that incorporates lessons learned and strengthens the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of Indigenous programs.

Conclusion

As a means to achieve a fundamental and profound shift in the Indigenous-Crown relationship, and to move forward in collaborative partnership, this essay recommends that the government adopt the combination of third and fourth considerations of developing a pan-Canadian e-learning communication platform, and incorporating a collaborative and comprehensive planning approach. As the Department embarks on a new fiscal relationship with Indigenous peoples, these considerations can be diffused to address the new directions of the federal government, and the values of Indigenous communities.

The commitment to a renewed relationship with Indigenous peoples is one that is based on a community-driven collaboration, founded on the principles of a nation-to-nation partnership, that responds to the existing issues while anticipating future challenges facing the growing Indigenous population in Canada. It is critical to assure the realignment of government priorities with the desired outcomes of Indigenous communities.[24] The aforementioned considerations can be transferred and implemented intra-departmentally within the Government of Canada, as well as cross-jurisdictionally between provincial, municipal and territorial governments. Systemic

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[19] Assembly of First Nations (2010, 19)

[20] Galloway, G. 2017. "Audits of Indigenous programs get little attention, watchdog says" *The Globe and Mail.* Retrieved via: https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/audits-of-indigenous-programs-get-little-attention-watchdog-says/article37106734/

[21] Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada. 2017. *Budget 2017 Highlights – Indigenous and Northern Investments.* Budget 2017. Retrieved via: https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1490379083439/1490379208921

[22] Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (2016, 6)

[23] Canadian Council on Learning – Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre (2007, 1)

[24] Opikokew Wajuntah, C. J. (2014, 155)

change, however, must stem internally in order to create a powerful and sustainable effect as it propagates externally to other departments and organisations.

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