

Aboriginal Institutions of Higher Education

***A Struggle for the Education of Aboriginal Students,
Control of Indigenous Knowledge,
and Recognition of Aboriginal Institutions***

An examination of government policy

By

The Aboriginal Institutes' Consortium

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Overview

Aboriginal peoples¹ continue to reclaim their cultures and languages and require educational programs that are responsive to their worldviews, histories, contemporary circumstances, social systems, and knowledge systems. Aboriginal-controlled post-secondary institutions have emerged in order to design, develop, and deliver educational programs that respond to the higher learning needs of Aboriginal persons.

Federal and provincial governments have not embraced this community-based Aboriginal development. Both the federal government and the government of Ontario have, to a certain extent, attempted to accommodate the special needs of Aboriginal students attending provincial colleges and universities by making funding available to these institutions to provide Aboriginal-specific programs and services. However, Aboriginal peoples are not content to remain consumers in the provincial education system. Ownership of traditional knowledge and application of appropriate methodologies and appropriate content are significant issues, and have driven Aboriginal communities to develop their own post-secondary institutions. These institutions are not formally recognized in federal or provincial law or policy as educational entities in the same manner as provincial colleges or universities, and operate on the periphery of the established education system in Canada.

¹ In this paper, 'Aboriginal peoples' refers to Métis, Inuit, and First Nations peoples.

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This study examines the history and development of Aboriginal-controlled post-secondary institutions and assesses how governments in Canada have responded to their development. It also examines major consequences of this lack of policy and legislative support by providing a comparison between Aboriginal institutions and provincial colleges and universities. Finally, because the issue affects Aboriginal institutions across Canada, recommendations for policy and legislative support for Aboriginal institutions are presented. This study also raises the question: 'Does racism exist with respect to Canadian policy and legislative support for Aboriginal-controlled post-secondary institutions?'

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Education can either be a tool for success or a tool for destruction. This study examines key events in the recorded history of Aboriginal education that have triggered a concentrated and consistent reaction from Aboriginal peoples to take continuous measures to design and develop an evolving and distinct education system to address the unique needs of Aboriginal peoples.

Education was one of the earliest means by which the Canadian government attempted to absorb and assimilate Aboriginal peoples into accepting the culture and educational practices of the dominant society. This study highlights some of the key events in the recorded history of Aboriginal education since European settlement and some of the outcomes resulting from colonial education systems.

The most notable practice employed for this purpose was the development of residential schools run primarily by various religious orders. The residential schools removed children from their communities, often leaving them unable to return home for a number of years. This social experiment inculcated Aboriginal children into Euro-Canadian religious values and social mores, including training in the Euro-Canadian understanding of the roles of men and women. Until 1951, the Indian Act of Canada forbade Aboriginal persons, defined as “Indian” for the purposes of the Act, from attending university unless they voluntarily relinquished their status as an Indian under a process called enfranchisement (The Indian Act, 1876).

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A review of the history of Aboriginal education highlights the actions and involvement of non-Aboriginal peoples in education and the need of Aboriginal peoples to define their own vision and aspirations for education. It also demonstrates that since 1972, Aboriginal peoples have consistently asserted their determination to regain control of their systems and institutions of education.

In 1969, the government of Canada tabled a White Paper document on the future of Aboriginal peoples in Canada (Ottawa, 1996a). It essentially called for the assimilation of Aboriginal peoples into the body politic, indistinguishable in law from the Canadian populace. This led to a massive mobilization of Aboriginal persons and the formation of numerous organizations dedicated to the recognition of Aboriginal rights and identity. In 1972, First Nations² in Canada joined together to issue a policy document entitled *Indian Control of Indian Education*, which demanded recognition of the right of Aboriginal people to educate their children (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972). This call has subsequently been reaffirmed in great detail in numerous documents including, most notably, the Assembly of First Nations' *Tradition and Education: Toward a Vision of our Future* (1988), the *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (Ottawa, 1996a and 1996b), and the relatively recent *Report of the Minister's National Working Group on Education* (Ottawa, 2002). Aboriginal peoples have been consistent in their demand for recognition of their education authority and control over the education of their children.

At every level – from early childhood to elementary, secondary, and post-secondary – Aboriginal peoples continue to develop and deliver education programs for

² The term 'First Nations' refers to Indians and their communities.

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their citizens with the understanding that “the Road to Knowledge is Eternal”³. The activities in which Aboriginal peoples have engaged include planning and administering elementary and secondary schools, developing immersion programs, providing early childhood education, partnering with mainstream colleges and universities, and ultimately, developing Aboriginal-controlled post-secondary institutions to deliver adult and post-secondary education programs. At every level, Aboriginal peoples have had to struggle with federal and provincial laws, policies, and procedures that do not serve their interests. As Aboriginal communities develop the capacity and the institutions needed to control their own education, government policies and programs have not evolved to recognize the work accomplished and the economic benefit of Aboriginal institutions in Aboriginal communities across Canada. It is important to note that mainstream institutions across Canada are afforded economic benefits due to the lack of policy support for Aboriginal-controlled institutions.

By the mid-1970s, the number of Aboriginal persons attending post-secondary institutes began to rise dramatically across Turtle Island (North America). The response across Turtle Island varied. In Canada, the federal government (through the Department of Indian Affairs) provided grants to established post-secondary institutes to develop and deliver programs specifically for these students. Provincial funds were also made available to mainstream, established institutions to develop and deliver culturally sensitive programs for Aboriginal students. In the United States, post-secondary institutions also began to address the growing number of Aboriginal students and state

³ This message was relayed by Eddie Benton Banai (2002) to his students in the Indigenous Knowledge/Philosophy Master’s degree program in which he is one of the lecturers. Mr. Benton-Banai describes this as a foundational philosophy of the Anishinaabe, in particular in their return to the language, philosophy, and traditions of the Anishinaabe.

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and federal funds were made available to assist these institutions in meeting the needs of Aboriginal students.

With the growing number of Aboriginal students came the need to control and deliver culturally appropriate programs to Aboriginal students. In the United States, the Tribal College movement began. In 1970, the Navajo Institute became one of the first Aboriginal institutions to deliver programs to its students. In Canada, Blue Quills First Nations College in Alberta, a former residential school, began to deliver programs for its students in 1971, responding to the need for local control of all Aboriginal education programs.

In the United States, there are now thirty-three Tribal Colleges, which are recognized through federal legislation as post-secondary institutions with the authority to grant certificates and two-year diplomas. In Canada, there are fifty Aboriginal post-secondary institutions; however, these institutions have not been afforded authority similar to that of their southern counterparts. Instead, current federal and provincial policies force Aboriginal institutions to partner with “recognized” mainstream post-secondary institutions in order to access funding and to ensure the credibility and portability of student credentials.

There are two primary questions that arise from this situation: (1) Why have Aboriginal post-secondary institutions not been recognized as having the right to grant diplomas, degrees, and certificates in their own right? and (2) Why won't governments in Canada provide Aboriginal institutions with equitable access to funding?

Existing federal and provincial policies and funding programs provide some acknowledgment of the work of Aboriginal institutions, but also entrench them as

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second-class institutions. Only in the province of British Columbia has legislation been passed to recognize two Aboriginal institutions as having the authority to grant degrees and diplomas (British Columbia, 1985). The rest of Canada must move forward and develop legislation to enable all Aboriginal institutions to hold this same authority.

Research into these issues highlights the successes achieved by Aboriginal peoples that have exercised control over their own education systems from the elementary level through to Aboriginal owned and controlled post-secondary institutions. This study demonstrates some of the unique aspects of Aboriginal post-secondary institutions, which differ significantly from the design and creation of mainstream post-secondary institutions. The ways in which Aboriginal institutions address the unique cultural, language, social, economic, and political needs of Aboriginal peoples evidences their successes in improving access, retention, and success rates of Aboriginal persons in post-secondary institutions.

This study demonstrates the extent of policy and legislative support for Aboriginal institutions, discusses policy limitations impacting the stability, growth, and continued development of Aboriginal institutions, and examines the consequences of the lack of policy support. Provincial and federal policy and legislative support for Aboriginal institutions from other jurisdictions such as Saskatchewan, British Columbia, the United States of America, and New Zealand provides examples of policy change that could occur to increase support for Aboriginal post-secondary institutions in Canada.

An examination and comparison of policy support for Ontario's mainstream post-secondary institutions in relation to the policy support for Aboriginal post-secondary institutions also operating in the province of Ontario demonstrates inequities in the

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system. For example, even when Aboriginal post-secondary institutions deliver mainstream programs, they are not eligible to receive direct operating grants that are available to mainstream post-secondary institutions for the same outcome. This brief example demonstrates how Aboriginal institutions are clearly disadvantaged by a lack of government support. This lack of policy support for Aboriginal institutions is discriminatory and creates barriers that have negative impacts on Aboriginal persons, communities, and Nations; ultimately, this impacts upon Canada's economy and labour market.

This study exposes the current situation; government policies have relegated Aboriginal institutions as second class institutions, reliant on "mainstream" institutions to validate their programs and grant diplomas and certificates. The potential for Aboriginal institutions to be in an equitable position where government funding is available, where the transfer of credits is honoured, where faculty and infrastructure are established, is not available within current legislation or policy. This is systemic racism, and this must change. Change must occur or Aboriginal post-secondary institutions will remain in a subservient position, responding to government policies and brokering programs that are recognized only by the established institutions. It is time to recognize the work that has been accomplished by Aboriginal post-secondary institutions in providing quality, cultural-based programming for their communities. Government policy and support must honour this work, and support the future equitable development of Aboriginal-controlled post-secondary institutions.