

**First Nations and Post-Secondary Education:
Opening, Respect and Governance**

Brief presented to the

Commission on Post-Secondary Education in New Brunswick

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Note: The views expressed in this document are solely those of the authors. We do not have the pretension to speak on behalf of the Université de Moncton, its faculty of Education, or the First Nations of New Brunswick.

1. Introduction

This brief was written in reaction to the discussion paper published in March 2007 by the Commission on Post-Secondary Education in New Brunswick. To begin with, we would like to share our preoccupation with the general ideological orientation of the document. Its stand borrows directly from the industrial and mercantile model, in a logic of cost-benefit analysis strictly defined in terms of finances, clientele service, offer and demand, and free enterprise. However, since we suspect that other briefs will tackle this worrisome orientation in depth, we prefer to turn our attention towards a specific aspect of post-secondary education: the place it reserves for the First Nations. In its discussion paper, the Commission¹ writes:

We cannot leave a discussion of accessibility without noting the underrepresentation of First Nations in our post-secondary institutions. This problem is tied up with jurisdictional issues, but the result remains unacceptable to all Canadians. We need to do better. (p.6)

First, we want to congratulate the Commission for its preoccupation with this important issue and for the presence of Anne Marie Levi, who works with First Nations People, on its advisory committee. However, we hope that the preoccupation expressed by the Commission reflects a real interest and that it will lead to concrete actions. In the discussion paper, the reference to the fact that “This problem is tied up with jurisdictional issues” awakens a certain apprehension: will we witness another exciting ping-pong match between the various levels of government? On the one hand, the federal government claims that education is of provincial jurisdiction, and on the other, the provincial government argues that the First Nations question is of federal jurisdiction.

This being said, this brief reacts specifically to the reduced space allotted, in the Commission’s document, to the least well served Canadian community in terms of post-secondary education: the First Nations. Such a brief and cryptic reference doesn’t reflect to deep thought on the causes of this underrepresentation of the First Nations in New Brunswick universities, no more than it announces a large scale consultation of First Nations political representatives. And yet, this is a priority, as confirms the Final Report of the Minister’s

¹ Commission sur l’éducation postsecondaire au Nouveau-Brunswick, 2007.

National Working Group on Education², which mentions that the gap between First Nations needs and demands and the teaching that is offered to them has only been getting wider for the past two centuries. It is with this in mind that we present, in the following pages, a brief survey of the socio-economic and educational situation of the First Nations People in New Brunswick, an overview of research results on the factors that influence First Nations in their academic perseverance and success, a reminder of jurisdiction issues, and, in conclusion, a list of recommendations for tackling this question.

2. First Nation Socio-Economic and Educational Situation in New Brunswick

First Nations People represent 1.4%³ of the total population in New Brunswick. Among First Nations, 45.4% of the population is less than 25 years old, which is only the case for 32.4% of non-First Nations in the province (see table 1). We may thus claim that First Nations are particularly touched by educational issues.

Table 1: Employment and Education. Data from the 2001 Census⁴.
(Note: First Nations identified on the basis of self-identification.)

	First Nations in New Brunswick	Non-First Nations in New Brunswick
% of population between 0 and 24 years of age	45.4%	32.4%
% of population 15 years and older attending school full time	14.5%	10.4%
% of population 15 years and older attending school part time	2.4%	2.4%
Highest level of schooling completed, population of 25 + years of age		
Less than a high-school graduation certificate	38.2%	29.8%
High-School graduation certificate	22.2%	26.4%
Trades certificate	33.5%	13.8%
University degree	6.0%	16.0%
Data on employment		
Population of 15 years and older with an income	89.8%	93.3%
Average annual income (population of 15 years and older)	\$11,426	\$18,257
Percentage of earnings income	68.7%	72.0%
Unemployment rate	28.1%	12.5%

² Gouvernement du Canada, ministère des Affaires indiennes et du Nord, 2002.

³ Gouvernement du Canada, ministère des Affaires indiennes et du Nord, 2007.

⁴ Statistics Canada, 2007.

On an educational level, First Nations aged 25 years and older in New Brunswick are proportionally more numerous than the rest of the population to have schooling inferior to a secondary level certification and are underrepresented among those who hold a university degree (all levels together). On an employment level, First Nations People in New Brunswick show a smaller fraction of the population of 15 years and older with an income, a smaller average income, a smaller rate of income from employment revenue, and an unemployment rate that is considerably greater than that shown by the non-First Nation population in the province.

It is clear to what extent educational issues related to post-secondary training are important to this population. However, simply painting a picture of the situation is not enough to identify the causes. What do we know about the historical, political, economic, educational, and social circumstances that led to the above findings?

3. Hypotheses Concerning the Factors that Influence Schooling among First Nations

Academic perseverance and achievement among First Nations in post-graduate studies have been studied as much from a macroscopic point of view than from a microscopic one. First, macro-social factors could help explain the lack of First Nation presence in post-graduate studies. To this end, Ogbu⁵ proposed a model of minorities' response to schooling in an educational system established by a majority society. According to him, First Nations belong to the category of "hierarchical" minorities, in that they were incorporated into the majority society more or less against their will through colonization. This forced incorporation was accompanied by compliance to stratification more rigid than social classes and, consequently, led to inequalities regarding access to education and employment requiring particular qualifications. This "hierarchization" was first expressed by explicit policies defining First Nation identity and restraining First Nations' legal rights. These discriminatory practices then allowed the emergence of social representations that persist well beyond the retraction of concrete obstacles such as laws and policies. So appear popular theories on academic achievement according to which, for example, the educational system is fundamentally unfair and calls for alternative strategies in order to attain social recognition. Discrimination can also generate a cultural resistance against a majority society, as a mechanism of collective self-

⁵ Ogbu, 1994a, 1994b, 1991, 1990a, 1990b, 1990c, 1988a, 1988b, 1987; Ogbu, & Simons, 1998.

defense against assimilation. In the United States⁶ and in Canada⁷, both resistance against school as a political institution of a society established as dominant, and adaptation, indeed ambivalence, of the cultural identity of First Nation students schooled in the present day colonial system, have been recorded. Finally, this situation is added to the kind of living conditions too often prevailing in First Nation communities, which contribute to propagating suspicion towards the majority society and its institutions, while simultaneously subjecting First Nation youth to considerable social and educational risk factors⁸.

The very educational structure was described as not being well adapted to the needs and cultures of First Nations. Thus, curricula, textbooks, and even teachers insensitive to First Nation cultures; a reduced or make-believe control of academic operations despite First Nation people progressively taking charge of educational services; the very definition of the school's role in First Nations' society project, as well as schooling often experienced in a second language, all were clearly identified as obstacles to the successful completion of compulsory education and to maintaining perseverance beyond secondary-school studies⁹.

Besides these macro-social factors, micro-social factors associated with programs specifically designed for First Nations People, with social support, or with students' personality were also studied. Thus, financial aid programs¹⁰ or academic support programs¹¹ designed for First Nation students would contribute to promote their academic perseverance and achievement. Also, at the level of social support, family, friends, and community support would play a very important role in First Nation students' achievement¹². Finally, at an individual level,

⁶ Deyhle, & Swisher, 1997; Gibson, 1997.

⁷ Cummins, 1997; Rasmussen, 2000.

⁸ Cummins, Ireland, Resnick, & Blum, 1999; Fisher, Storck, & Bacon, 1999; Hobfoll, Bansal, Schurg, Young, Pierce, Hobfoll, & Johnson, 2002; Hobfoll, Jackson, Hobfoll, Pierce, & Young, 2002; Kirmayer, Boothroyd, Tanner, Adelson, & Robinson, 2000; Larose, 1989; Whitbeck, Hoyt, McMorris, Chen, & Stubben, 2001.

⁹ Adetula, 1990; American Indian Society for Engineering and Sciences, 1994; Battiste, Bell, & Findlay, 2002; Berger, 1994; Bourque, 2004; Brod, & McQuiston, 1997; Charest, 1992; Clarkson, 1992; Davison, & Miller, 1998; Douglas, 1994; Goddard, & Foster, 2002; Hampton, 1995; Hookinaw-Witt, 1998; Lafortune, Mongeau, Pallascio, & Allaire, 1995; Larose, 1988, 1984; Perley, 1993; Prater, Rezzonico, Pyron, Chischille, Arthur, & Yellowhair, 1995; Preston, 1991; Ryan, 1996; Sarrasin, 1994.

¹⁰ Bazylak, 2002; Canabal, 1995; Montgomery, Miville, Winterowd, Jeffries, & Baysden, 2000; Sloane-Seale, 2003.

¹¹ Bazylak, 2002; Laquer, 1998; Waller, Okamoto, Hankerson, Hibbeler, Hibbeler, McIntyre, & McAllen-Walker, 2002.

¹² Machamer, & Gruber, 1998; Montgomery, Miville, Winterowd, Jeffries, & Baysden, 2000; Sandefur, 1998; Whitbeck, Hoyt, McMorris, Chen, & Stubben, 2001.

motivation¹³, self-esteem¹⁴, and cultural identity¹⁵ are only a few factors that would also play a role in young First Nations' academic trajectory.

4. First Nations Governance and First Nation Rights

The preceding section painted a complex and nuanced picture of the factors that should be considered when studying First Nations People academic situation. To this we add the governance issue. For several decades now, there has been a consensus stating that the success of First Nation education is impossible as long as First Nations do not have a real control over educational decisions and operations¹⁶. Yet, it is rarely the case at the level of post-secondary studies. For many, the lack of First Nation presence in universities and their sometimes disappointing results speak loudly of the institutional failure of an educational device that continues to ignore the specific needs and realities of the First Nations¹⁷.

Regarding this, the Draft United Nations declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples¹⁸ clearly states in many articles the First Nations right to govern an education system that respects their cultural particularities. Article 15 stipulates that:

Indigenous children have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State. All indigenous peoples also have this right and the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning. Indigenous children living outside their communities have the right to be provided access to education in their own culture and language. States shall take effective measures to provide appropriate resources for these purposes.

Article 16 follows the same idea, but concerning the public education system:

¹³ Canabal, 1995.

¹⁴ Whitbeck, Hoyt, McMorris, Chen, & Stubben, 2001.

¹⁵ Bourque, & Larose, 2006; Grantham-Campbell, 1998; James, Chavez, Beauvais, Edwards, & Oetting, 1995.

¹⁶ Antone, 2000; Carr-Stewart, 2001; Gouvernement du Canada, Ministère des affaires indiennes et du Nord Canada, 2002; Hampton, 1995; Hookinaw-Witt, 1998; Kawagley, 1999; National Indian Brotherhood / Assembly of First Nations, 1972; Ryan, 1996.

¹⁷ Antone, 2000; Carr-Stewart, 2001; Gouvernement du Canada, Ministère des affaires indiennes et du Nord Canada, 2002; Hampton, 1995; Hookinaw-Witt, 1998; Kawagley, 1999; Ryan, 1996.

¹⁸ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2000.

Indigenous peoples have the right to have the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations appropriately reflected in all forms of education and public information.

Along the same lines, teaching a First Nation language is not limited to certain technical aspects but also includes teaching a way of life and a philosophy¹⁹. In addition, a First Nation traditional curriculum cannot be learned only in books or within the four walls of a conventional classroom²⁰.

Other articles underline their rights to participate in the political process that influences their living conditions, as well as the government's obligation to consult First Nations before legislating on that which concerns them.

5. Conclusion

It is in light of the information presented here that we analyze the reference made to First Nations' accessibility to post-secondary education in the Commission's document. What the current situation suggests goes beyond the simple improvement of geographic accessibility to educational services. Insofar as current statistics are truly "unacceptable" in the eyes of the commissioners (as they are for Indian and Northern Affairs, Canada), it is clear that the Commission and the various levels of government will have to take a firm position and transform their commitment into concrete actions. With this in mind, here are a few recommendations:

- Before producing a final report, the Commission should consult directly and actively with First Nations decision-making bodies;
- That First Nation representatives be involved in the discussions, decisions, processes, and actions aimed at modifying the current educational device in favour of a larger First Nation presence in post-graduate studies;
- That the actions carried out reflect a global vision of indigenous realities, that they consider education as being part of a wider social, economic, cultural, and political

¹⁹ Oakes, & Riewe, 1997.

²⁰ Larose, 1991.

- system, and that they focus on a group of factors, educational and others, which can affect academic perseverance and achievement;
- Following this line of thought, that the actions also reflect an interdisciplinary discussion involving professionals from the fields of education, health, social services, as well as First Nation political representatives;
 - That a larger place be allotted to indigenous languages and cultures in post-secondary education;
 - That more control be given to First Nations decision-making bodies concerning operations management of education designed for their communities.

We hope that our position will be seriously considered during the elaboration of the final report and that the issue of First Nations education will see concrete actions and a real commitment from the governing bodies.

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