



An Effective Post-Secondary Process Can Engage Top Aboriginal Talent

Increasing Aboriginal participation in post-secondary education can help reduce the labour shortage. It will take a coordinated and culturally sensitive outreach effort.

Canada's labour supply shortage is acknowledged, leading to government and business efforts to attract global talent. However, they can look closer to home for part of the solution.

There are a growing number of Aboriginal students attending Post-Secondary Education (PSE) programs, and they represent home talent that can fill critical workforce shortages and skills gaps. It makes so much sense that a strategy was added to the national agenda: Increase the role of PSE in engaging and developing Aboriginal talent potential. To achieve goals, the Canadian government, businesses and PSE must work closely together to support efforts to close educational gaps, while creating employment opportunities for those with advanced skills at the same time.

Aboriginals are participating at higher rates in PSE. In 2011, 281,765 Aboriginals graduated college, earned university degrees, or completed trade school or apprenticeship programs. In every category, gains were made between 1996 and 2011. That is the good news.

On the flip side, there is still plenty of room for improvement because there is a 20 percent gap between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals completing PSE. Another disparity is found between On Reserve Aboriginals, status Aboriginals, Inuit, and First Nations populations and the remaining Aboriginal populations (Off Reserve, Non-Status, Métis). Sizing the problem is important, but it is also necessary to understand that a large group of Aboriginals are not reaching PSE attainment, representing talent and opportunities lost in real terms.

Learning Culturally Sensitive Approaches from PSEs

Both the Canadian government and businesses have to play a role in closing the educational gap and increasing the Aboriginal labour supply. People generally stay in school because they see education and training as a means to an end.

Factors that discourage Aboriginals include difficulty in accessing educational programs, lack of employment opportunities, and inability to connect education with economic improvement and community development. The last factor of community development is complex. Currently many Reserve Aboriginal and Status Aboriginal jobs are in the public sector and are not viewed particularly beneficial to uplifting the community either socially or economically.

Where does the country go from here? PSE institutions have begun to take important steps in attracting and retaining Aboriginal students, and their experiences provide potential employers a



path to success. For example, one of the important lessons that the University of British Columbia (UBC), the University of Manitoba (UofM) and the University of Saskatchewan (UofS) learned is that Aborigines have a deeply ingrained culture and need to maintain ties with each other as they transition to institutions of higher education.

For example, UBC has a First Nations Longhouse where students can meet. Second, the universities are not just sitting back and waiting for Aborigines to enroll. UofM has senior manager recruiters who travel to the Aboriginal communities. UofS has a high school outreach program to encourage Aboriginal youth to consider PSE attainment. Other strategies include developing Aboriginal student services; creating curriculums that include Aboriginal knowledge and culture; offering social and cultural activities; having elders on campus; adding Aboriginal faculty; providing transition programs; and providing tailored academic counseling, mentoring programs and employment counseling.

The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) plays a lead role in closing the educational gap in Aboriginal communities. Improving educational attainment levels increases Aboriginal employability and will boost Canada's economy. However, education alone is not enough.

Aboriginal youth and young adults must see a direct connection between education and their ability to get a job and utilize training and education. The labour potential is enormous. In 2013, there are approximately 560,000 Aborigines under 25 years old. Therefore, it is just as important for employers to join the effort to promote education and to attract, retain and engage Aboriginal workers who will then serve as role models.

Accelerating Aboriginal Engagement, Employment

Engagement is the first step in encouraging PSE attainment. The government funds programs that help businesses find, employ and train workers, as well as educational programs. Employers need to be fully aware of the programs in order to fully utilize them. Employing Aborigines is a PSE recruitment strategy by example. Employers can follow the lead of the higher education institutions and develop outreach programs in which company representatives visit Aboriginal communities and universities to discuss employment opportunities and skills gaps.

Two reasons why more Aborigines are not employed in greater numbers are: 1) Aboriginal wariness of companies due to conflicting relationships within their communities; and 2) lack of employment information. Businesses are addressing both of these factors through outreach. Some companies are establishing employment centres and offering workshops in Aboriginal communities. Businesses can also offer internships, scholarships, job shadowing, mentoring programs and job training initiatives to either youth or adults. Like universities with elders on campus, messages delivered by Canadian businesses concerning skills needs and employment opportunities will be more engaging if delivered by Aboriginal staff.

Technology is also providing opportunities that did not exist before. Many Aborigines are reluctant to leave their communities out of fear of losing cultural ties, thus see no benefit in PSE attainment.



Distance education and teleworking can provide Aborigines employment opportunities that do not require relocation. Universities can help upgrade adults' skills and increase their interest in education by utilizing their technological resources and offering workshops, seminars and classes. Success stories that can serve as models include efforts to offer PSE nursing and social work training in remote communities. More work is needed, especially in northern and remote communities that significantly lack access to PSE.

Unless education rates are raised, Canada can expect to invest even more heavily in government social programs and to experience lower productivity rates. Poor educational outcomes block increased Aboriginal workforce participation. Initiating change requires a coordinated effort between the Canadian government, post-secondary educational institutions and businesses. The potential payoff is enormous in terms of a more inclusive, educated and productive workforce, and that benefits all Canadians.