

Investing in Aboriginal Education Benefits Everyone

Increased educational attainment for Aboriginals would improve personal health and wealth – and significantly influence the Canadian economy

December 17, 2009 – Improving educational outcomes for Aboriginals in Canada is the most effective means to alleviate Aboriginal marginalization and poverty, argue the authors of two technical papers on the issue commissioned by Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN). Investing in Aboriginal education would also have a positive and long-lasting effect on the Canadian economy as a whole, the authors conclude.

Investing in Aboriginal Education in Canada: An Economic Perspective by economist and Executive Director, Andrew Sharpe, and senior economist, Jean-François Arsenault at the Centre for the Study of Living Standards (CSLS), examines the strong positive correlation between education, employment and earnings that is well established in social science research, and postulates various positive economic outcomes for the Canadian economy – regionally and nationally – if Aboriginal educational attainment was improved even marginally. Sharpe and Arsenault argue that Canada's Aboriginal population could play a key role in mitigating the looming long-term labour shortage caused by Canada's ageing population and low birthrate.

Sharpe and Arsenault estimate that if Aboriginal education and education-specific labour market outcomes reach 2001 non-Aboriginal levels by 2026, all levels of the Canadian government would incur an increase in total tax revenue. In addition, if the average Aboriginal Canadian benefitted from the same social and economic conditions as those enjoyed by the average Canadian, all levels of government could re-allocate significant social program savings toward other programs.

By adding the decreased program expenditures and increased tax revenues, Sharpe and Arsenault estimate that the cumulative effect on government balance sheets would be roughly \$115 billion for the 2006-2026 period. For Sharpe and Arsenault, the message is clear: investing in Aboriginal education will not only benefit the Aboriginal population itself, but will also benefit Canadian governments and businesses, and by extension, the Canadian economy as a whole.

In the second CPRN paper, ***Aboriginal Education: Strengthening the Foundations***, John Richards, Professor in the Public Policy Program at Simon Fraser University and the Roger Phillips Chair in Social Policy at the C.D. Howe Institute, and Megan Scott, graduate student at Simon Fraser University's Public Policy Program provide a detailed analysis of the current state of Aboriginal educational programs and policies across Canada's regions and highlight the successes, failures and lessons learned.

Richards and Scott take as their starting point the widening gap in educational levels between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals. Specifically, they focus on policies to improve educational completion for Aboriginal populations at the K to 12 levels. The authors note that as Aboriginals have "moved to town" the provincial role in education has become increasingly important: most Aboriginal children (4 in 5) attend provincially run public schools.

Richards and Scott argue that while many of the gaps in Aboriginal social and economic status have complex origins, improving educational outcomes is the social policy that most needs our attention. The authors draw on parallels between African Americans and North American Indians and First Nations as historically marginalized communities. They note that many of the educational lessons learned in the US over the last half-century have relevance as Canadians grapple with the long-neglected issue of Aboriginal education.

Richards and Scott conclude their extensive review with a clear set of policy recommendations for improving Aboriginal educational attainment both on and off-reserve that, importantly, include

participation from all levels of government, businesses, community organizations and Aboriginal leadership.

Like Sharpe and Arsenault, Richards and Scott recognize that the future of Aboriginal populations in Canada *is* the future of Canada: that the two are inextricably linked, and that investing in Aboriginal education is an investment that will benefit all Canadians.

For more information:

- [*Investing in Aboriginal Education in Canada: An Economic Perspective*](#) by Andrew Sharpe and Jean-François Arsenault
- [*Aboriginal Education: Strengthening the Foundations*](#) by John Richards and Megan Scott

About Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN)

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