

Pathways for First Nation and Métis Youth in the Oil Sands

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Executive Summary

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This study looks at the political, social, and economic influences on First Nation¹ and Métis youth's attitudes toward further learning and higher levels of education in the municipality of Wood Buffalo, Alberta, the site of rapid industrial development related to the oil sands in the past few decades. Linked to this, we explore some of the institutional and policy structures that support or hinder the ability of First Nation and Métis youth to find pathways leading to sustained employment with decent pay, good working conditions, and career potential.

The first five sections of this report set the context by presenting an historical overview of government-Aboriginal relations, a review of statistics related to education and training of the Aboriginal identity population in Canada and Alberta, recent literature focused on Aboriginal youth, and a description of relevant education and training policies and issues. The last two sections present our analysis of 65 interviews and focus groups involving 91 individuals, conducted between March and October 2008. Interview participants consisted of a number of Aboriginal community members, including youth aged 15 to 30 years; high school and college educators, including First Nation and Métis educators; representatives of government; leaders and staff members of local First Nation and Métis organizations; as well as individuals involved in various capacities with local agencies and corporations.

Our historical overview suggests that jobs alone are unlikely to eliminate the inequities experienced by Aboriginal communities – inequities that stem, in large part, from historical relations between governments and Aboriginal people. Further, while dependency and economic underdevelopment are unacceptable to Aboriginal people, increased economic development is also seen as problematic by some community members concerned over the growing environmental impacts, continued loss of cultural ways, and worsening social problems (e.g. lack of housing, homelessness, substance abuse) that have accompanied large-scale oil sands development in Wood Buffalo. It is important to acknowledge these tensions for First Nation and Métis youth when thinking about their pursuit of education and work pathways.

Statistics suggest that, while the Aboriginal identity population in Wood Buffalo is doing “better” in terms of educational attainment and employment than their counterparts in other parts of the province, it is noteworthy that they continue to lag behind Alberta's non-Aboriginal population. In research, the experience of First Nation and Métis youth is often analyzed from a deficit perspective; for example, authors have highlighted various factors adversely impacting Canada's Aboriginal youth, including low educational attainment and household income, high rates of teen pregnancy, high rates of incarceration, and high rates of residential and school mobility. However, this portrayal of youth is only useful, in our view, if understood within the context of historical colonization and contemporary uneven power relations and if accompanied by greater discussion of institutional opportunities and constraints.

¹ In many instances, we use the term “First Nation” rather than “First Nations” in this report. This is to infer that the youth, people, students, individuals, schools, communities, reserves, etc. being referenced are associated with specific sovereign, distinct entities in the Canadian context. The term “First Nations” is a more general descriptor.

A look at federal and provincial policies and programs related to First Nations and Métis education and training suggests that, although there is a plethora of policies and programs, issues around access to and control over education and training persist for Aboriginal people. Further, outcomes do not seem commensurate with the level of investment by the various partners. In Wood Buffalo, industry has become an influential player in education and training due to its stated interest in developing capacity within local Aboriginal communities and working with them to develop a pool of skilled labour. However, increased reliance on industry partners appears to foster inequities within and across communities and to result in a more fragmented approach to education and training in the region.

Our interview data suggest other issues related to education and training as follows:

Challenges in K-12 Education

Quality of schooling in Wood Buffalo is a key concern according to many of the First Nation and Métis interview participants with whom we engaged.² There is a perceived hierarchy of schools, with the small, northern schools operated by Northlands School Division being viewed as providing a low quality of schooling compared with those in larger centres such as Fort McMurray. Factors seen as contributing to the poor quality of education for First Nation and Métis students in rural schools include:

- Low expectations of teachers, lack of discipline/structure in the school
- School staff turnover; insufficient preparation of staff to teach in the province's small, northern schools
- Low levels of parental involvement both at home or in the school
 - Influences on parental involvement include the legacy of residential schooling and work demands on parents employed by industry
- Addiction issues in northern communities, which have an adverse affect on education for First Nation and Métis youth
- Inadequate educational facilities/resources in small communities, e.g.
 - declining student enrolments; underfunding of education
 - few staff with the expertise to deal with students who have special needs
- Too few Aboriginal teachers
- “Social pass” – promoting children to the next grade before they are academically ready
- Streaming of Aboriginal high school students into non-post-secondary courses

² First Nations and Métis individuals make up a significant portion of our interview participants, composing a majority of the students, parents, and community members with whom we spoke. A portion of the education professionals and employers whom we engaged in the region are of First Nations or Métis descent, and representatives and staff of various Aboriginal organizations in Wood Buffalo are for the most part also First Nations or Métis individuals.

Various *challenges for First Nation and Métis youth in urban schools* were identified as key concerns by our interview participants. Some communities have no choice but to send children to a larger centre to access secondary schooling; Conklin, where presently there is no high school, is one such community. For many families, sending children to urban centres for education is undertaken with the presumption that it will lead to better results. However, several interview participants suggested that attending school in Fort McMurray or another urban centre does not necessarily ensure high school completion. Factors seen as contributing to poor educational outcomes for Aboriginal students in urban schools include:

- Young age of students when they leave their families and communities to attend high school
- Lack of resources (financial and other) to fully support youth who are staying in boarding homes
- Aboriginal youth's experiences of racism

Inadequate career planning is an important theme stemming from our interviews with educators and learners in Wood Buffalo:

- Students appear to be more focused on completing high school than planning for post-secondary education; students may be unaware of the consequences of their course selections.
 - More girls than boys state a desire for post-secondary education and professional careers.
 - There is a lack of professional role models for First Nation and Métis youth in school settings.
- First Nation and Métis students are aware of local employment/career opportunities, yet very few are in industry-related career preparation programs (e.g. the high school apprenticeship program) because they do not meet the entrance requirements.
- There appears to be a lack of career development opportunities overall for First Nation and Métis youth in Wood Buffalo.

Challenges in Post-18³ Education and Training

Issues concerning upgrading were voiced by many interview participants:

- There are large numbers of First Nation and, to a lesser extent, Métis high school leavers who engage in lengthy upgrading.
- There appears to be little recognition of prior learning in upgrading programs in the region.
- There are multiple funding sources that youth are required to navigate as well as differences in funding availability between communities.
- Stringent funding criteria of government programs and insufficient levels of funding relative to the cost of living are also concerns.

³ We use the term “post-18” to refer to education and training for youth aged 18 years or older.

Control over education and training is an issue in Wood Buffalo, reflected in part in the tensions between what communities see as their training needs and which programs are actually being provided. Other concerns regarding the control over education and training include:

- An over-reliance on industry to address specific training needs
- The need for not only upgrading, but college-level programs in communities such as Fort Chipewyan, Fort McKay, and Janvier
- An almost exclusive focus on job readiness, employability, and entrepreneurialism with few initiatives aimed at personal and community healing

Other issues in post-18 education and training mentioned by interview participants include:

- The need for more cultural programming
- Uneven access to funding/services across communities and Aboriginal groups (i.e. Métis students are not eligible for Indian and Northern Affairs Canada [INAC] post-secondary education funding)
- High staff turnover in Aboriginal organizations and college learning centres
- Lack of articulation (i.e. transferability) of college programs with other post-secondary programs
- Low program completion rates and employment rates, particularly for First Nation and Métis youth involved in short-term training

Challenges in Work

Gaining employment with large industrial employers is important for many First Nation and Métis interviewees. Barriers to employment can be seen as related to:

- Industry tests (e.g. Test of Workplace Essential Skills [TOWES]), which often screen out individuals, even those with a completed Grade 12
- The low value placed on prior learning (e.g. no recognition for Indigenous knowledge, on-the-job work experience, or other informal learning)
- The need for a driver's license
- The requirement of drug testing
- The necessity of having to leave one's home community (housing and family support) for the purpose of work

Finally, there appears to be a predominance of *contract and labour* work for Aboriginal people in Wood Buffalo.

Conclusion

Recognizing the complexity of the Wood Buffalo context, we offer the following observations based on our case study.

Lack of knowledge: There is a need for more research pertaining to Aboriginal education, training, and work that is driven by the concerns of First Nation and Métis people. As noted in a report by the Canadian Council on Learning (2007), there is a gap between Aboriginal perspectives and government reporting frameworks with respect to indicators of learning outcomes. These different perspectives suggest that current indicators may be irrelevant for Aboriginal peoples and therefore insufficient for informing government policy.

Racism: There is a greater need to acknowledge and address the individual, systemic, and institutional racism faced by First Nation and Métis youth and adults in Wood Buffalo in formal education, training, and work.

Capacity: There are evident inequities in the organizational capacity of First Nation and Métis representative groups as compared with governments and large multinational corporations in Wood Buffalo. Currently, capacity building in the region tends not to be a *bottom-up* process involving clarification of the assets that communities already have and strengthening members' capacity to act on their own values and priorities. Important for communities in Wood Buffalo are collaborative efforts that can address capacity differences through recognizing that maintaining relationships and partnerships requires persistence, effort, time, resources, and committed, skilled, and sustained leadership. Consultation and direct involvement with First Nation and Métis communities is critical to the development of effective programming, from project planning and inception to service delivery and evaluation.

Holistic, integrative programs: Education and training should be conceived in terms of how they contribute to the needs of the whole person and community as well as their role in addressing economic needs (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007). At present, there is little integration of education and training with other First Nation and Métis community development initiatives.