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### New pathways for aboriginal youth needed; Community level involvement critical

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Over a decade ago, in response to fragmented and reactive programming, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) called for a national aboriginal youth policy that would involve aboriginal groups as equal partners.

Including aboriginal youth in the development of policy that directly concerns their welfare was seen as the first step to their empowerment.

Unfortunately, this important recommendation has not been adequately adopted by governments or by industry in Canada--particularly when establishing educational and employment programs targeted at First Nation, Metis and Inuit youth, which have had limited or mixed success.

A recent study by **Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN)**, Pathways for First Nation and Metis Youth in the Oilsands, examines the plethora of education and training programs designed for aboriginal youth in the heart of oilsands development-- the municipality of Wood Buffalo--and finds the results disappointing and not commensurate with the level of investment by the various partners involved.

A more fruitful path, the report argues, would include direct participation and engagement with First Nations and Metis youth and communities, who could offer critical insight into why programs have not been more successful, and how positive change may occur for the future.

The issue of education for aboriginal youth is paramount and cannot be overstated.

In the province of Alberta generally, a staggering 67 per cent of First Nations on reserve, ages 20-24, do not have a high school diploma; 46 per cent of First Nations living off-reserve and 29 per cent of Metis in the same age range do not have a high school degree. This compares with the provincial average of 16 per cent (non-aboriginal youth) who do not finish high school.

First Nation and Metis youth in the oilsands region fare somewhat better than their counterparts in the province, but they continue to significantly lag behind Alberta's non-aboriginal population both in terms of educational attainment and employment rates.

The **CPRN** study, which involved extensive interviews and focus groups with First Nation and Metis youth in the region, ages 15 to 30, in addition to interviews with educators, community leaders, government and industry representatives, found that the problem is complex and involves addressing a range of factors, including contemporary political, social and economic influences, as well as generational and historic context.

Youth interviewed flagged a number of barriers to education, including their prior experiences in compulsory education--experiences that often included tough tradeoffs, racism and feelings of failure associated with moving from small rural to large urban schools.

Quality of schooling itself is a key concern, with some youths highlighting low expectations of teachers, high rates of school staff turnover, inadequate educational facilities, too few aboriginal teachers and lack of cultural programming, as key issues. Social and familial struggles, such as the legacy of residential schools manifested in addiction issues and lack of parental involvement in education, as well as lack of financial resources, were also highlighted. As well,

youth highlighted the patchwork of government programs, resulting from jurisdictional tensions between federal and provincial levels of government, as often hard to navigate.

In addition, the "hot economy" in the region (unlikely to continue at the same pace given the current economic recession) appears to act as a "pull" for students who already feel "pushed out" of formal schooling.

In fact, industry has become an influential player in education and training in the region, 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 and results in a more fragmented approach to education and training in the region. It may also mean that students are exposed to a narrow range of career options as a result.

With such a wide-ranging and complex issue, finding the path forward is neither clear nor easy, but the **CPRN** study highlights some concrete steps and critical insights.

First, there are obvious differences in the organizational capacity of First Nation and Metis communities as compared with governments and large multinational corporations. To address such differences, it is necessary that capacity building be bottom-up and based on identifying the assets that communities already have and strengthening members' ability to act on their values and priorities. Consultation and direct involvement with First Nation and Metis communities--particularly the youth, who want to help shape their own future--is critical to the development of programs.

Further, recognition that aboriginal learning, understood as lifelong, experiential, rooted in language and culture, spiritually oriented, communal, and involving the integration of aboriginal and Western knowledge, extends beyond current measures of success used by policy-makers, and should be valued and recognized.

Programs that encourage and support youth to re-engage with formal education at different times, that promote mobility to more advanced programs, and that recognize and credit prior informal learning could be part of a broad, comprehensive, and integrated set of policies that address the holistic learning needs of youth.

Engagement at the community level, involving all segments of aboriginal society, including youth, is the only way forward. Their future --and ours--depends on it.

Glen Roberts is vice-president, Research and Development at **Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN)**, leaders in socio-economic policy research and engagement. **CPRN** recently published *Pathways for First Nations and Metis Youth in the Oilsands* by Alison Taylor, Tracy L. Friedel and Lois Edge, available at [www.cprn.org](http://www.cprn.org).

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