BC First Nations Post-Secondary Students

Fact Sheet

This fact sheet is intended to provide a snapshot of participation in and completion of post-secondary education (PSE) for First Nations people in BC. First Nations have inherent and Treaty rights to lifelong learning, including post-secondary education. Currently, First Nations PSE students access Indigenous Services Canada (ISC)'s Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP) for financial assistance. The fact sheet uses data from PSSSP and Statistics Canada, and is limited by availability of federal government data.

FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION OVERVIEW

First Nations (FN) students graduate high school and attend post-secondary education (PSE) at a lower rate than non-indigenous British Columbians

There are 90,355 First Nations people aged 25-64 in BC

10%

Do not have a high school diploma compared to 5% of non-indigeneous people

4,518

Students upgrading to High School diploma are required to close the secondary school gap between First Nations and non-First Nations.

29%

of high school graduates have not completed post-secondary education as of 2024

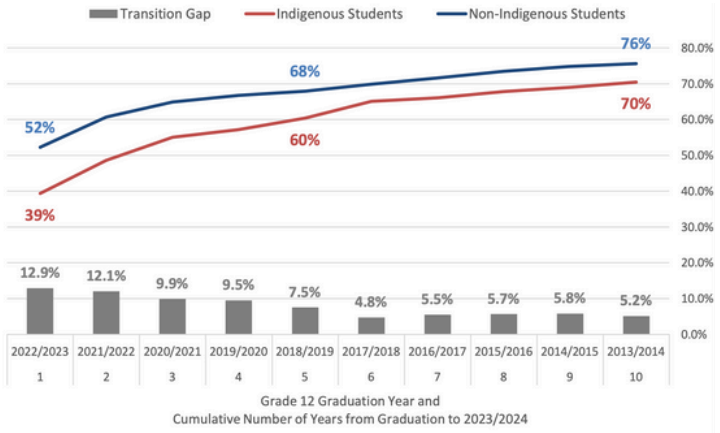
11,760

Students are required to close the PSE gap between First Nations and non-First Nations.

BC Trends in Indigeneous PSE

- Indigenous students experience a greater delay between graduating high school and entering PSE (Figure 1).
- Female students are more likely than males to pursue PSE.[1]
- PSE attendance rises in correlation with higher family income levels.[1]
- Those enrolled in French Immersion or excelled in Math were more likely to go to PSE.[1]
- Students are less likely to go to PSE if they attend alternative schools or distance education programs [1]

Figure 1: Cumulative Transition Rates into B.C. Public Post-Secondary Education: Indigenous vs. Non-Indigenous Students



Source: Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Training. (2025). Student transitions project. Province of British Columbia. https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/post-secondary-education/data-research/student-transitions-project

1 - SRDC. (2023). Indigenous students' access to post-secondary education ... https://srdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/bcpi-report-final-feb2023.pdf

All data points on this page are from Statistics Canada, unless otherwise stated. Table 98-10-0423-01 Highest level of education by Indigenous identity, Indigenous geography and labour force status: Canada, provinces and territories. Table 37-10-0117-01 Educational attainment in the population aged 25 to 64 living off reserve by Indigenous group

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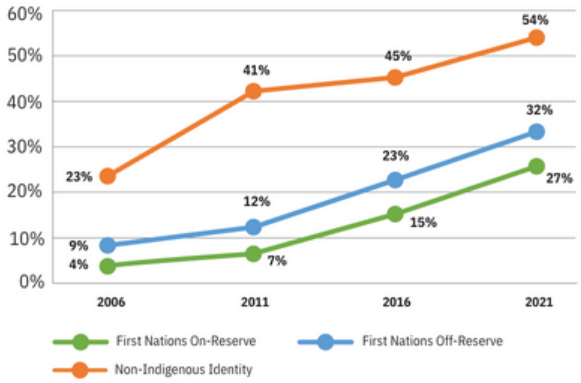
UNDERSTANDING THE POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION GAP

First Nations university attainment has significantly increased since 2006, with rates being 23 percentage points higher in 2021.

Figure 2: University attainment rates (certificate, diploma or degree), aged 25-64, by area of residence, 2006-2021



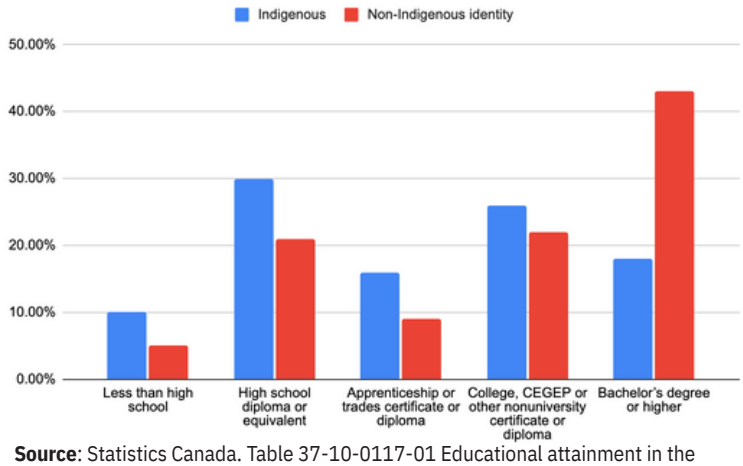
Source: Statistics Canada. Table 98-10-0423-01 Highest level of education by Indigenous identity, Indigenous geography and labour force status: Canada, provinces and territories.

- Currently, First Nations people with university attainment at the bachelor's and graduate levels enjoy slightly higher rates of employment rates than their non-Indigenous counterparts (1.4-percentage points higher at the undergraduate level, and 3.2-percentage points higher at the graduate level
- Gains in FN PSE attainment have been matched by non-indigenous students. The current gap between First Nations and non-Indigenous Canadians remains at 22-percentage points for First Nations off-reserve, and 27-percentage points for First Nations on-reserve.

A gap exists between the types of PSE First Nations people receive compared to Non-indigenous students

- In 2021, only 43.7% of FN people aged 25 to 64 years had completed PSE, compared to 67% of non-Indigenous British Columbians.
- FN students in post-secondary are more likely to obtain trade or college level certifications.
- Since 2016, FN attainment rates in PSE have increased significantly at the college and university level nationally (+1.6%), but their growth has not matched non-indigenous students. From 2021 to 2024 rates in BC did not increase for FN students despite raising by 4% for non-indigenous students

Figure 2: Highest level of education achieved in BC in ages 25-64 in 2024: Indigeneous and Non-indigenous



Source: Statistics Canada. Table 37-10-0117-01 Educational attainment in the population aged 25 to 64 living off reserve by Indigenous group

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RURAL VS URBAN FN EDUCATION: A NATIONAL COMPARISON

There is a geographic divide in how Indigenous students in Canada access and transition to post-secondary education (PSE).

1

SCHOOLING ON- AND OFF-RESERVE

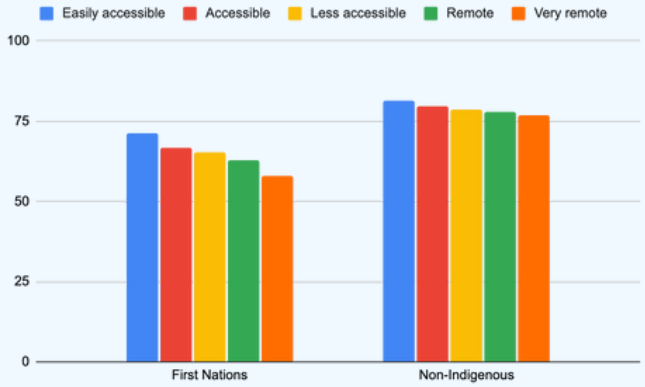
- First Nations youth off-reserve are far more likely to graduate high school (73% vs. 46%) and pursue post-secondary education (44% vs. 23%).[1]
- A contributing factor is that nearly half of on-reserve students must leave their communities to access a high school.[1]

DISTANCE CAN BE A BARRIER

2

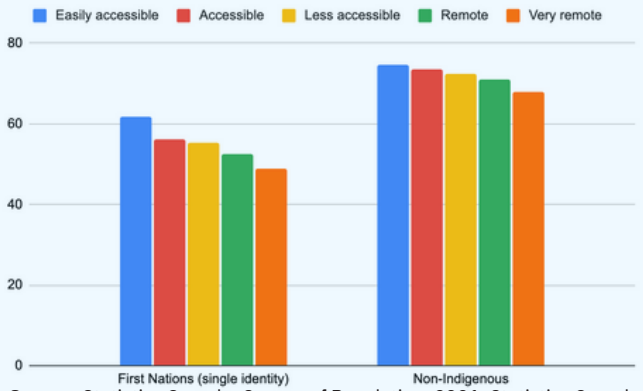
- Geographic proximity improves educational outcomes for underserved groups by reducing financial barriers and preserving community ties.
- In 2021, FN Canadians who lived in easily accessible communities were nearly twice as likely to have a high school equivalency as those who lived in very remote areas.[2]
- PSE attainment and employment rates are inversely proportional to remoteness (Figures 2 and 3)

Figure 3: Percent of FN adults aged 25-64 with a post-secondary qualification by level of remoteness: FN and non-indigenous in 2021



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021. Statistics Canada.

Figure 4: Employment rates among adults aged 25 to 64 years by level of remoteness: FN and non-indigenous in 2021



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021. Statistics Canada.

3

PROXIMITY DOES NOT ALWAYS EQUAL ACCESS

- 86% of Indigenous Canadians live within 50km of a post-secondary institution, but despite this proximity, attainment remains low in remote areas.[3]
- In "very remote" areas of Canada, post-secondary attainment drops to ~26% (compared to ~50% in easily accessible urban areas). This suggests that simply "being near" a school isn't enough—barriers like funding, transportation, and culturally unsafe environments persist.[2]

1 - Layton, J. (2023a). First Nations youth: Experiences and outcomes in secondary and postsecondary learning. Statistics Canada. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/81-599-x/81-599-x2023001-eng.htm

2 - Layton, J. (2023b). Distance as a Factor for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit High School Completion. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/81-595-m/81-595-m2023002-eng.htm

3 - Colleges and Institutes Canada. (2024, March 20). Accelerating reconciliation. https://www.collegesinstitutes.ca/what-we-do/our-priorities/accelerating-reconciliation/

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BARRIERS TO PSE

A FINANCIAL BARRIERS AND FUNDING LIMITATIONS

Financial instability is cited as the single most significant barrier to PSE for FN students.[1]

1. PSSSP
   - There is a misconception that First Nations students receive "free" post-secondary education. In reality, the federal Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP) operates on a fixed budget that has not kept pace with inflation or population growth.
   - Because funding is limited, students eligible for funding can be waitlisted for years.[2]
2. High Cost of Relocation in BC
   - Rural-to-Urban Migration: Most First Nations communities are rural, but major institutions are in high-cost urban centers.[3]
3. Socioeconomic Gaps
   - Intergenerational Poverty: Due to the legacy of colonialism, Indigenous families statistically have lower accumulated wealth than non-Indigenous families.
   - Debt Aversion: Research shows Indigenous students are significantly more "debt averse" than their peers. Because they often come from low-income backgrounds, student loans feel like a trap rather than an investment, leading many to drop out rather than borrow money.[4]

B GEOGRAPHICAL DISADVANTAGE

On-reserve students are half as likely to have a local high school, forcing early separation from family. This separation repeats at the post-secondary level, leading to high rates of homesickness and isolation.[5]

C SYSTEMIC EXCLUSION

Indigenous students report feeling "othered" on campus, citing a lack of Indigenous faculty, curriculum that ignores Indigenous history, and experiences of racism as key reasons for dropping out.[6]

D MENTAL HEALTH

Intergenerational trauma and the stress of navigating colonial institutions create significant mental health burdens that are often unsupported by standard campus services.[3]

E MATURE STUDENTS

Demographically, First Nations students in BC are often older than the average high school leaver and are more likely to have dependents and higher personal expenses.[5]

1 - Jones, M. E. C. (2023). Post-secondary funding and the educational attainment of indigenous students. Economics of Education Review, 97, 102475.
2 - Mack, K. (2018). Indigenous educational pathways: Access, mobility, and persistence in the BC post-secondary system. Academia.edu. https://www.academia.edu/70864825/Indigenous_Educational_Pathways_Access_Mobility_and_Persistence_in_the_BC_Post_Secondary_System
3 - St. Germaine, N. (2022). Barriers and facilitators for accessing Indigenous supports literature review. indispire.ca. https://indspire.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Barriers-and-Facilitators-for-Accessing-Indigenous-Supports-Literature-Review-FINAL.pdf
4 - Factors affecting the use of student financial assistance programs by Aboriginal Youth. cmec.ca. (2008). http://www.cmec.ca/publications/lists/publications/attachments/197/factors-affecting-aboriginal-youth.pdf
5 - Layton, J. (2023a). First Nations youth: Experiences and outcomes in secondary and postsecondary learning. Statistics Canada. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/81-599-x/81-599-x2023001-eng.htm
6 - Systemic discrimination against indigenous people - BC human rights tribunal. BC Human Rights Tribunal - We deal with human rights complaints in B.C. (2025, May 22). https://www.bchrt.bc.ca/indigenous/discrimination/systemic/

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POST-SECONDARY STUDENT SUPPORT PROGRAM (PSSSP)

The Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP) is a federal initiative that provides financial grants to eligible First Nations students to help cover tuition, travel, and living expenses.

- Since 1996, the number of students funded through PSSSP has been capped at approximately 25,000 students.
- Students funded through PSSSP has not substantially increased since 1996. This is despite an increase in First Nations population and increased high school graduation rates.
- The PSSSP has consistently assisted 3,000 to 4,000 graduates per year (approximately 14% of students in the program).
- First Nations require an additional investment of $8.53 billion to meet currently funded and unfunded students' needs.

If First Nations age **25-64** attained similar education rates to the rest of Canada, there would be:

85,724
additional First Nations high school graduates

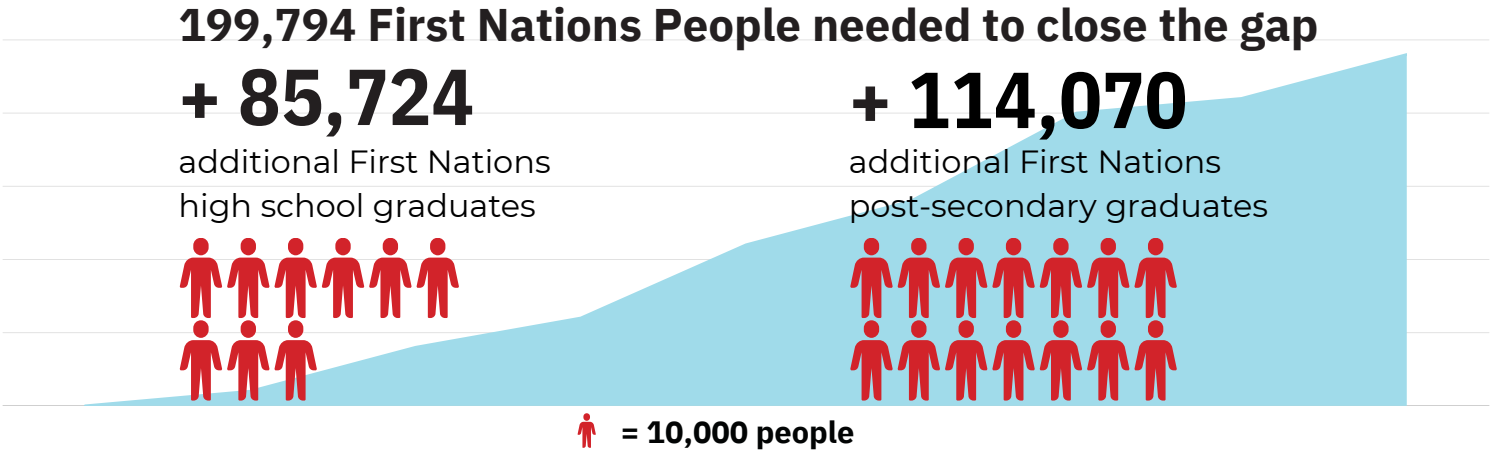
114,070
additional First Nations post-secondary education graduates. [1]

Closing the education gap between First Nations and the rest of Canada by **2041** is associated with substantial benefits, including:

$24.7 billion
in First Nations GDP gains over baseline measures

106,000 additional jobs for First Nations, a **38.3%** increase in total First Nations output

Figure 6: First Nations Population 1996 vs. 2021



1 - Over baseline measures. Closing the First Nations Education Gap in Canada: Assessing Progress and Estimating the Economic Benefits — An Update. Retrieved from: AFN-Closing-the-Gap_Report-2023_EN.pdf (csls.ca). 2023.