

7. Is the education achievement gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians closing?

Unfortunately not. The education attainment of Aboriginal peoples in Canada is increasing, but since the attainment of non-Aboriginal peoples is also increasing, the gap at the higher end of the education attainment spectrum is getting wider.

The existence of an educational achievement gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians is well documented. According to the 2011 National Household Survey :

- 29 percent of Aboriginal peoples (age 25 to 64) had not completed high school, compared with 12 percent of non-Aboriginal peoples;
- 48 percent of Aboriginal peoples had attained a postsecondary credential (certificate, diploma or degree), compared with 65 percent of non-Aboriginal peoples
- 10 percent of Aboriginal peoples had attained a university degree, compared with 27 percent of non-Aboriginal peoples.

Those identifying as Métis do comparatively better than First Nations people (and particularly First Nations people living on-reserve) and Inuit (for instance, 12 percent of Métis had a university degree, compared with five percent for both Inuit and First Nations people living on-reserve).

The key question, however, is not whether or not a gap exists, but whether this gap is closing.

At the local level, it is clear that there are a number of success stories – that is, cases where the results for Aboriginal students in individual schools and communities have shown improvement.

At the nation-wide level, the picture is more mixed.

Variations in the methodology of the census over the last decade have made the production of comparative data

over time more difficult. The available data, however, show improvements in the education attainment of Aboriginal peoples over time.

The 2011 NHS, for instance, shows that education attainment of Aboriginal peoples aged 35-44 year was better than those in the older age group – a clear indication of progress. For instance, 68 percent of those aged 35 to 44 had at least a high school diploma, compared with 59 percent of the older 55 to 64 age group. That said, it is notable that all the progress was made by Aboriginal women; there was virtually no difference between the educational attainment between males in the two age cohorts.

Comparisons of the results of different censuses over time (however dubious they may be given methodological inconsistencies) also suggest that progress is being made.

- For instance, as noted above, the 2011 NHS reported that 29 percent of Aboriginal peoples (aged 25 to 64) had not completed high school; the figure as reported in the 2006 census was 34 percent.
- The 2011 NHS reported that 48 percent of Aboriginal peoples (aged 25 to 64) had a PSE qualification; the figure as reported in the 2006 census was 44 percent. Figures for university degree attainment for Aboriginal peoples are six percent in 2001, eight percent in 2006, and 10 percent in 2011.

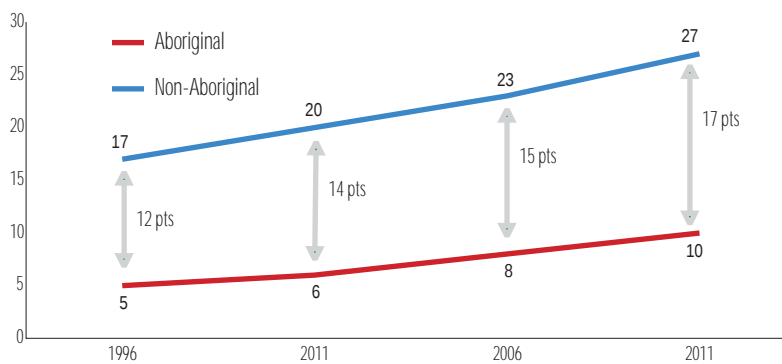
The problem is that, despite this progress, the position of Aboriginal peoples relative to non-Aboriginal peoples in Canada is not changing. In fact, because the educational attainment of non-Aboriginal Canadians continues to improve at a faster rate, the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples at the higher end of the education attainment spectrum is widening.³⁴

³³ Statistics Canada, The Educational Attainment of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada – National Household Survey (NHS), 2011; available at: http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-012-x/99-012-x2011003_3-eng.pdf

³⁴ Previous analyses by both John Richards and the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation have noted a lack of progress in closing the education gap between Aboriginal peoples and non-Aboriginal peoples in Canada, despite the gains being made in Aboriginal education attainment over time. See the discussion of this issues in Joseph Berger, Anne Motte and Andrew Parkin, eds., *The Price of Knowledge: Access and Student Finance in Canada*, fourth edition (Montreal: Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2009), pp. 52-54; available at: <http://www.yorku.ca/pathways/literature/Access/The%20Price%20of%20Knowledge%202009.pdf>. These findings have been reconfirmed in a newer analysis by Catherine Gordon and Jerry White; see: Catherine E. Gordon and Jerry P. White, "Indigenous Educational Attainment in Canada," *The International Indigenous Policy Journal* Vol. 5, Issue 3 (June 2014), pp. 12-14.

- In terms of high school completion, the gap is narrowing. In 2006, the proportion of adults who had not completed high school among Aboriginal peoples was 19 points higher than the average for non-Aboriginals; in 2011, the gap was 17 points. In terms of the proportion with any form of postsecondary qualification, the gap fell from 17 points in 2006 to 16 points in 2011.
- However, in 2006, the proportion of non-Aboriginal Canadians with a university degree was 23 percent, which was 15 points higher than the proportion for Aboriginal Canadians. In 2011, according to the NHS, the proportion for non-Aboriginal Canadians was 17 points higher than that for Aboriginal Canadians. Measured in this way, the education attainment gap is widening (see Chart 5).

Chart 5
University Attainment by Canadians aged 25-54
 By Aboriginal Status (1996-2011)



Source: Statistics Canada 2011 NHS and census reports, with additional data from Catherine E. Gordon and Jerry P. While, "Indigenous Educational Attainment in Canada," *The International Indigenous Policy Journal*, Vol. 5, Issue 3 (June 2014).