

Jurisdictional Quagmire Undermines Development of Education Institutions Serving Aboriginal People

A Statement Issued by the Aboriginal Institutes Consortium
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Aboriginal owned and controlled post-secondary institutions have been successfully addressing education and training needs of Aboriginal communities in Ontario since 1985. Unfortunately, the federal and provincial governments continue to place undue restrictions on the limits of the success of Aboriginal institutions by continuing to argue over which government has the responsibility to fund these institutions.

Aboriginal institutions were established by Aboriginal communities to address needs that were not being addressed by mainstream education institutions. Aboriginal institutions have worked endlessly with both the federal and provincial governments to ensure the necessary resources are available to meet current and future needs of Aboriginal people. In Ontario, eight Aboriginal controlled post-secondary education institutions are represented by the Aboriginal Institutes' Consortium (AIC), an organization that is supported by the Chiefs in Ontario to negotiate with the provincial and federal governments for recognition and resources.

The AIC has worked with other First Nations across Canada on the Joint Indian Affairs/Assembly of First Nations Post-Secondary Education Working Group established in 2004 to review the federal funding policy that supports post-secondary programs. The working group commissioned an independent research report on the issue which was released in March of 2006. The report calls for a revamping of the Indian Studies Support Program to ensure the policy is "based on the fundamental objective of supporting Indigenous Institutes of Higher Learning to effectively occupy a permanent place in the Canadian post-secondary landscape" and to "provide continued support for the development of, and access to, culturally appropriate and relevant post-secondary programming for First nations students." The report also outlines the need to have core funding for governance, administration and equipment, operational funding for program development and delivery, funding for students support and capital funding to address facilities and equipment costs. Indian Affairs halted the work of the joint national Working Committee in February of 2006. The Department has taken the position that matters relating to post-secondary institutes are a provincial responsibility.

The federal Indian Studies Support Program currently assists seven of the eight Aboriginal institutions in Ontario with funding for program delivery. ISSP funding is allocated as annual grants based on historical allocations. The total ISSP allocation was capped in 1996. The fund does not cover the total costs of program delivery nor does it allow for institutional support or expanding on the number of programs being delivered. Year to year funding forces Aboriginal institutions to deliver multi-year programs "on a hope and a prayer" that funding will come through the next year.

On the provincial side, the AIC has worked continuously with the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities to ensure adequate supports are in place to assist Aboriginal institutions in addressing the education and training needs of Aboriginal communities. The Aboriginal Education and Training Strategy (AETS) has provided important support for program development and delivery in Aboriginal institutions, however the larger

issues of recognition and equitable resourcing with mainstream have not been addressed. The Ministry commissioned a review of AETS and released its report in March 2007. The report calls for the Government of Ontario to “adopt a more coherent policy” and to “create a roadmap for Aboriginal institutions to obtain public funding. Although Ontario identified Aboriginal education as a key priority, in July 2007, the then Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities made a firm statement that Aboriginal institutions are primarily a federal responsibility.

The jurisdictional argument is an impediment which creates inaction on the part of both levels of government. It is hoped that the same creativity which governs cooperative federal-provincial relationships in areas such as labour market training and health can help drive positive action to support the needs of Aboriginal institutions.

Aboriginal people and communities have high aspirations for their people and their communities to be productive and contributing citizens in society. Aboriginal institutions are a key mechanism to support those aspirations and we all know that education is the key to prosperity. It is notable that Aboriginal institutions have been recognized in law in the United States since 1978. It is time for Canada and Ontario to accept the cultural and intellectual diversity which Aboriginal institutions represent.

The current funding crisis affecting First Nations Technical Institute is a prime example of the lack of collaboration between governments and Aboriginal institutions and between the federal and provincial governments.

The role of private sector funding in Aboriginal institutions has been limited due to the barrier of not being recognized as degree and diploma granting institutions in the province of Ontario, and the pervasive myth that governments provide for Aboriginal education needs. It is hoped that stronger relationships will develop over time with the private sector. Governments can be helpful in this respect by promoting the many successes of our institutions and creating broader public awareness.

End the jurisdictional debate in support of a strengthened economic society! Expand government parameters of funding support to enable Aboriginal institutions to address community needs in education and to assist Ontario in building a strong economy.