OFIFC

Ontario Federation of
Indigenous Friendship Centres

Urban Indigenous Labour Force and Training Strategic Framework: Identifying Our Potential

Revised April 2016

Urban Indigenous Labour Force and Training Strategic Framework

Identifying Our Potential

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Executive Summary

The urban Indigenous population is the youngest and fastest growing population in Ontario, growing at nearly double the rate of the non-Indigenous population, 1.8 percent compared to 1.0 percent.[1] Urban Indigenous youth, under the age of 24, represent 48 percent of the Ontario urban Indigenous population.[2]

The non-Indigenous population is aging at a higher rate with a median of 37.2 compared to 24.5 for the Indigenous population.[3] As a result of this aging population, Ontario's labour force is faced with an impending skills shortage that will impact Ontario's public and private sectors' ability to attract and retain necessary skills and labour.

With education and training, the young and growing urban Indigenous population can provide a sustainable solution to the anticipated skilled labour shortages while increasing economic agency among urban Indigenous people and their communities in Ontario. Strategies must thus be developed to address the challenges faced by the urban Indigenous population, in particular youth, to better position them to transition into the Ontario labour market.

In response to these existing and emerging challenges, the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres (OFIFC) has developed this Urban Indigenous Labour Force and Training Strategic Framework (Strategic Framework). The Strategic Framework will explore wholistic ways in which to address the sustainable involvement of urban Indigenous people in the Ontario labour force by identifying four strategic goals:

- *Increasing the Role of Friendship Centres in Community Economic Development*
  Friendship Centres are community economic development drivers that employ local urban Indigenous community members, purchase local goods and services, and draw investments from government and other sources to build social service networks that meet local community needs. Through community economic development (CED) practices, the needs of local communities are placed at the forefront resulting in a more wholistic and sustainable approach to economic and labour force development. There is a need to build on the success of this model to expand labour force opportunities that engage the aspirations of community members while considering the demands of the local labour market.

- *Addressing Systemic Barriers to Education, Training, and Employment*
  Urban Indigenous people face a variety of barriers, including poverty, racism, violence against women, housing, and health which impede their ability to

[1] Jeanette Steffler, "Aboriginal Peoples: A Young Population for Years to Come," Hope or Heartbreak: Aboriginal youth and Canada's future. Horizons: Policy Research Initiative, 10(1) (2008).
[2] Government of Ontario., *Breaking the Cycle, Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy* (Toronto, ON: Government of Ontario, 2008). 15.
[3] Ibid.

successfully transition into education and employment. By addressing these barriers Indigenous peoples will be better positioned to enter, and remain in, the Ontario labour force.

- *Supporting Urban Indigenous Youth*
  Youth, as the fastest growing segment of the urban Indigenous population, require additional supports to enhance their ability to obtain the education and training required for Ontario's labour force as it shifts to a skilled knowledge economy.

- *Addressing the Gaps within the Education to Employment Continuum*
  The education to employment continuum presents a number of challenges within the urban Indigenous population, namely, racism, lack of culturally relevant curriculum, the lack of access to positive Indigenous role models, low literacy, low educational attainment and an inefficient provincial employment and training system, which results in high incidence of disengagement. Cultural-based and wholistic approaches to increase (re)engagement will ensure urban Indigenous peoples are better able to transition along the education to employment continuum.

The strategic goals and priority areas present strategic direction for OFIFC and Friendship Centres to work with government, public sector, and not-for-profit organisations to address the challenges facing the urban Indigenous population and increase their access to, and engagement in, the Ontario labour force. The Strategic Framework will drive education, employment and training activities for the OFIFC and Friendship Centres going forward.

Background

The OFIFC is an urban Indigenous organisation representing the collective interests of 28 member Friendship Centres located in towns and cities throughout Ontario. The OFIFC administers a number of programs which are delivered by local Friendship Centres in areas such as justice, health, family support, long term care, children and youth, healing and wellness and employment and training.

The vision of the Indigenous Friendship Centre Movement is "*to improve the quality of life for [Indigenous] people living in an urban environment by supporting self-determined activities which encourage equal access to and participation in Canadian Society and which respect Indigenous cultural distinctiveness*."

Urban Indigenous people face considerable challenges when entering and remaining in the Ontario labour force. These challenges include low educational attainment, low retention rates in trades and apprenticeships as well as more systemic challenges, namely, racism and lack of cultural understanding.

Education plays a central role in the ability of individuals to obtain access to the labour market. As such, efficient mechanisms must be put in place to promote successful transitions for urban Indigenous people by identifying and addressing the challenges they face in the education to employment continuum.

OFIFC believes that a cultural approach should form the basis of an Urban Indigenous Labour Force and Training Strategic Framework. As community hubs, Friendship Centres have been central to the success of culturally-based programming for urban Indigenous people and, information gathered from the Friendship Centres and based in community experience heavily informed the development of OFIFC's Strategic Framework.

This updated Strategic Framework builds heavily on the original 2013 strategy, however has been modified to reflect the changing policy landscape surrounding education, employment and training initiatives in Ontario. Noteworthy revisions include revised priority sectors, and a change in strategy goal four moving away from a focus on private sector engagement to one of community economic development.

Revised Priority Sectors

The newly revised priority sectors have been selected to better reflect priorities identified by Friendship Centres and conversations with youth that have focused on individual career aspirations.[4] These sectors will be critical in supporting urban Indigenous communities in a post-Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Canada. All five priority sectors support the development of self-sustaining urban Indigenous communities and play a critical role in community economic development practices. The revised five priority sectors are:

1. Social Services;
2. Culture and Education;
3. Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) – including construction;
4. Health Services; and
5. Administrative, Transportation, Hospitality and Services Sectors

All priority areas are intended to create employment opportunities in sectors that allow for the recognition and space for Indigenous culture within mainstream sectors. The OFIFC will focus advocacy efforts on increasing opportunities for urban Indigenous people, in particular youth, to participate in these sectors through education and training

[4] The priority sectors identified in the original Strategic Framework (health services, services sector, mining sector, construction sector and green energy) were selected to enable the emerging urban Aboriginal labour force to meet the demands of an ever changing and increasingly demanding labour market, while matching provincial priorities outlined in the Growth Plan for Northern Ontario and provincial budgets. In alignment with the Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy, these areas were selected under the guiding principle to "support demand-driven skills development".

advocacy, along with tangential supports, such as housing, transportation and mental health in order to facilitate transitions in and out of education and employment.

Though not identified as a specific priority sector, self-employment is a fast growing area of Indigenous employment. Between 2006 and 2011, the number of self-employed Indigenous people increased by 15.6% while the number for all self-employed Canadians declined by 4.4% during the same period.[5] It is important that entrepreneurship and related community supports and skills development are included in all sectoral work that the OFIFC engages in. It will also be important for Friendship Centres to have knowledge of this growing demographic so that can also engage with, and support, aspiring entrepreneurs. Additionally, there is a need to ensure there are spaces in post-secondary business schools and other related programs for Indigenous students to increase their knowledge and skills as entrepreneurs in ways that respect their values and identities as Indigenous people.

The Need for an Urban Indigenous Labour Force and Training Strategic Framework: Ontario Urban Indigenous Demographics

Increasingly, the Indigenous population in Ontario is becoming urbanised. According to the 2011 National Household Survey, 84.1 percent of Indigenous people in Ontario now reside off-reserve in towns, cities and rural communities.[6] Additionally, this urban Indigenous population is young and growing during a time when the Ontario population is aging. In fact, urban Indigenous youth are recognised as the fastest growing population in Ontario – 48 percent of Indigenous people in Ontario are under the age of twenty-four.[7] Additionally, more than 100,000 Indigenous youth will come of age to enter the labour market by 2026.[8]

Recognising the opportunities of the young and growing urban Indigenous population, there is tremendous potential for their contribution to the diverse needs of Ontario's labour market and economy. The facts surrounding this young and fast growing population in Ontario are of critical importance when assessing Ontario's evolving labour market needs (or requirements). However, current labour market outcomes for urban Indigenous people are well-below those of non-Indigenous people. In 2012, the unemployment rate of off-reserve Indigenous youth in Ontario was 23.5 percent compared to 16.8 percent for non-Indigenous youth, while the unemployment rate for off-reserve Indigenous people, aged 35-54 was 9.2 percent compared to 6.3 percent for non-Indigenous people.[9] While the average income of Indigenous people in Ontario is about $27,944 compared to $39,655 for non-Indigenous people;[10] and between 2007

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[5] Statistics Canada, *National Household Survey.* (Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada, 2011).
[6] Ibid.
[7] Government of Ontario, *Breaking the Cycle, Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy* (Toronto, ON: Government of Ontario, 2008). 15.
[8] Jeanette Steffler, "Aboriginal Peoples: A Young Population for Years to Come," Hope or Heartbreak: Aboriginal youth and Canada's future. Horizons: Policy Research Initiative, 10(1) (2008).
[9] Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities., *Canada-Ontario Labour Market Agreement, 2013-14 Annual Plan* (Toronto, ON: Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2013).
[10] Statistics Canada, *Census of the Population* (Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada, 2006).

and 2010 the high school drop-out rate for off-reserve Indigenous students was 22.6 percent compared to 8.5 percent for non-Indigenous youth in Canada.[11]

Additionally, as the non-Indigenous population ages, Ontario is faced with a labour shortage. A 2010 study by Rick Miner entitled *"People Without Jobs – Jobs Without People: Ontario's Labour Market Future*" argues that Ontario faces two looming challenges for the future, namely:

i. As the population ages, the requirement of the labour force will be based on the knowledge economy, requiring the labour force to have formal education and training beyond high school; and
ii. Using data from the Ontario Ministry of Finance the predicted shortfall in the availability of workers is set at a minimum of 200,000 to a high of 1.8 million by the year 2031 (depending on population growth), with further estimates that 77.1% of the labour force by 2031 will require skilled workers.

The composition of Canadian labour force demographics will change dramatically over the next 15 years. It is estimated that:

- Between 2010 and 2031 the economy will generate between 2 and 4 million jobs;
- The labour force will age drastically by 2031. 25 percent of the workforce will be 55 years or older compared to 16.9% in 2010;
- Visible minorities will compose up to 40% of the labour market in Ontario in 2031 compared to the 2006 national average of 15.7%.[12]
- 80 percent of new jobs in Canada required a PSE credential in 2031, which is up from 70% in 2011;
- The Canadian labour force will face a shortage in qualified workers that may leave 2,325,700 jobs unfilled by 2031.[13]

The young and growing urban Indigenous population is poised to make significant contributions to Ontario's anticipated labour force shortages. Strategic, Indigenous-specific approaches will assist in the promotion of successful transitions from education to employment for urban Indigenous people.

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[11] Jennifer Lawrence, "The New Face of Aboriginal Education", *Professionally Speaking,* March 2013. Retrieved from: http://professionallyspeaking.oct.ca/march_2013/features/index.html.
[12] Statistics Canada, Projected trends to 2031 for the Canadian labour force (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2011) http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-010-x/2011008/part-partie3-eng.htm
[13] Rick Miner, The Great Canadian Skills Mismatch: People Without Jobs, Jobs Without People and More (Toronto: Miner Management Consultants, 2014).

The Need for a Community Driven Labour Force Strategy

To date, a large proportion of education, employment and training work in the Province of Ontario has focused on the needs of a changing labour market. This Strategic Framework proposes broadening the focus on demand-supply requirements to include and prioritise community needs. This means recognising and understanding the demographic realities in Ontario: the opportunities of a young and growing urban Indigenous population coupled with the projected shortfall of needed workers in Ontario, and applying this knowledge in a way that is cognizant of community needs. As early as 2004, Indigenous youth have been referred to, and continue to be referred to, as an investment in economic growth.[14] While accurate, it is important that it is consciously recognised that Indigenous youth are not simply tools to fill sector vacancies, but individuals with their own career aspirations and hopes for the future.

A community driven labour force strategy is critical considering the desire of many urban Indigenous youth to work for Indigenous communities as their career. According to a graduate survey completed by Indspire, 84 percent of respondents indicated that they serve the Indigenous population in their post-graduation employment. Motivation for this work varied and included a desire to support fellow Indigenous people by addressing systemic barriers in mainstream institutions or were influenced to pursue careers to which they are exposed the most, for example education.[15] There are many ways to serve communities and youth should be empowered to pursue a variety of career choices and paths that support their individual aspirations. It is important that communities are able to use market opportunities to meet their own needs through increasing labour market and training experiences for urban Indigenous youth in a variety of fields.

The community driven nature of this Strategic Framework also recognises that for a large proportion of urban Indigenous people, success in education and employment is not a priority. It is important that the Strategic Framework remains rooted in poverty reduction principles and continues to include work on narrowing the socio-economic gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people through the provision of services such as social assistance, housing, mental health, and food provisions.

Purpose

The purpose of this Strategic Framework is to support the development of a qualified urban Indigenous labour force in order to:

- Meet community economic development needs;

[14] Michael Mendelson, *Aboriginal People in Canada's Labour Market: Work and Unemployment, Today and Tomorrow* (Ottawa, ON: Caledon Institute for Social Policy, 2004).
[15] Indspire, *Creating Positive Outcomes: Graduation and Employment Rates of Indspire's Financial Award Recipients* (Ohsweken, ON: Indspire, 2015).

- Support individual job-seekers achieve personal career ambitions;
- Facilitate enhanced urban Indigenous contributions to Ontario's labour market; and
- Ensure equitable access to education, employment and training for urban Indigenous people.

Strategy Goals

This Strategic Framework explores the ways in which the OFIFC and Friendship Centres can work with government and public and private sector organisations to address the sustainable involvement of urban Indigenous people in the Ontario labour force. This task will require a wholistic approach within which inter-related barriers facing urban Indigenous people's entry into, and success within, Ontario's labour market are addressed. In developing the urban Indigenous labour force it is important to look ahead. The OFIFC strives to develop an urban Indigenous labour force with skills that are transferable among sectors as the Ontario economy changes and new industries emerge and expand, while also supporting community economic development. This focus will allow the urban Indigenous labour force to seize new opportunities in the long term.

In order to guide the development of a skilled urban Indigenous labour force, the Strategic Framework will focus on four key goals: Increasing the Role of Friendship Centres in Community Economic Development; Addressing Systemic Barriers to Education, Training and Employment; Supporting Urban Indigenous Youth; and Addressing the Gaps within the Education to Employment Continuum. Each of these strategy goals identifies priority areas, which provide a framework for addressing the key labour force challenges facing the Ontario urban Indigenous population.

Strategy Goal 1: Increasing the Role of Friendship Centres in Community Economic Development

Recognising the increasing consensus for the need to prioritise reconciliation work with Indigenous communities, it is important that economic development considers community needs as a foundational principle. Community economic development (CED) emphasises the importance of community voice in meeting local and social economic needs, diverging from the primary focus of wealth creation in traditional economic development practices.[16] According to the Canadian Community Economic Development Network, CED is defined as:

> Action taken by people locally to create economic opportunities that improve social conditions, particularly for those who are most disadvantaged. CED is an approach that recognises that economic, environmental and social challenges

[16] Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres, *Social Economy Framework for Ontario's Urban Aboriginal Communities* (Toronto, ON: Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres, 2015).

> are interdependent, complex and ever-changing. To be effective solutions must be rooted in local knowledge and led by community members. CED promotes [w]holistic approaches, addressing individual, community and regional levels, recognising that these levels are interconnected.[17]

The inclusion of CED is a deliberate evolution from historical emphasis on increasing private sector engagement with Friendship Centres. While there has been Friendship Centre engagement with business and industry, it has typically been short-term and unsustainable. Perhaps more importantly, relationships with the private sector have predominately been focused on the role Friendship Centres and the urban Indigenous population can have in supporting private sector goals. CED allows for partnerships to be prioritised based on shared mandates and values that align with the work of Friendship Centres and the OFIFC. By putting community first in economic development partnerships, it is hoped that communities will be able to capitalise on market opportunities to meet their needs in building a healthy and sustainable community.

Friendship Centres are economic drivers in their communities, large employers and consumers of locally sold goods and services. The economic value of Friendship Centres is particularly evident in small communities. Investments are needed to increase the economic capacity of Friendship Centres to support local community through creating and maintaining partnerships with local CED organisations. As capacity is increased, the ability to create meaningful and mutually beneficial partnerships with private sector will become a sustainable option that each Friendship Centre can consider based on its own expertise of local needs.

The majority of Friendship Centres currently operate or have in the past operated some form of revenue generating activity, and as such Friendship Centres are active members in the social economy. From operating daycares, space rentals, fitness centres, catering services, facilitation services, and craft stores, Friendship Centres are utilising earned income strategies that not only provide services to the community but also subsidise revenues for programming. Friendship Centres have demonstrated capacity and the ability to produce goods and services for sale, and this activity is meeting a "blended value return".[18] However, without increased support, Friendship Centres will continue to be challenged to take proactive leadership roles in seeking out CED partnerships and initiatives. Three distinct stages should be considered in order to optimise Friendship Centres' role in CED initiatives:

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[17] The Canadian CED Network, "What is CED," The Canadian CED Network, https://ccednet-rcdec.ca/en/what_is_ced.

[18] Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres, *Social Economy Framework for Ontario's Urban Aboriginal Communities* (Toronto, ON: Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres, 2015).

Figure 1: A Staged View of Supporting Friendship Centres' Implementation of CED

With progress in each of these stages, Friendship Centres will have the capacity to engage in CED initiatives with mainstream community agencies and local governments, through increased human resource capital, infrastructure and access to specialised skillsets and services. It is important that Friendship Centres are recognised as local leaders, and have the capacity to discuss the importance of CED principles in their communities. Friendship Centres and the OFIFC have already begun developing critical CED partnerships with local District Social Services Administration Boards and Community Municipal Service Managers, organisations that are increasingly understanding their role in reconciliation work. Through these and other partnerships, education, training and employment supports can be delivered in a way that recognises unique community needs and priorities. CED partnerships will support Friendship Centres achieve greater levels of self-sufficiency and will support greater proactive responses, moving away from crisis response management. It is hoped that CED will provide the needed community awareness and supports that will allow urban Indigenous people to more concretely and consciously participate in the local, regional and provincial labour force.

Strategy Goal 2: Addressing Systemic Barriers to Education, Training and Employment

Urban Indigenous people experience many systemic barriers and challenges to education, training and employment that need to be addressed for the successful development of an urban Indigenous labour force, namely poverty, racism, and housing.

High poverty rates among urban Indigenous people, with one in four (29%) urban Indigenous families living below the low-income cut off (LICO) and over one-half (53%) of single urban Indigenous people living below the LICO,[19] have a considerable effect on educational attainment and transitions to employment for urban Indigenous people. In particular, these poverty rates mean that urban Indigenous children and youth are growing up in low-income families, which is having negative effects on their development from an early age. Additionally, Indigenous youth are overrepresented in child welfare and youth criminal justice systems, a trend that often results from intergenerational trauma and chronic poverty. High poverty is also having limiting effects on the ability of urban Indigenous people to obtain safe, secure, and stable housing. High incidences of poverty among urban Indigenous people constitute one of many barriers to education, training and employment, all of which inhibit urban Indigenous people from successfully and sustainably entering and navigating the Ontario labour force.

In order to appropriately address the systemic barriers facing urban Indigenous people when accessing education, training and employment, a multi-pronged approach is required. Initial steps to removing systemic barriers faced by urban Indigenous people should be informed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC's) Calls to Action for all levels of government, private sector, and Indigenous organisations. These steps are broadly described and outlined in the figure below:

Figure 2: A Staged Approach to Addressing Systemic Barriers

[19] Peter Dinsdale, National Association of Friendship Centres, Presentation to Best Start Conference, March 9, 2010. Available at: http://beststart.org/events/detail/poverty/Peter%20Dinsdale.pdf

Many urban Indigenous people living in poverty and/or accessing social assistance are also faced with compounding challenges such as mental health and addictions and family violence. It is estimated that roughly one quarter of Indigenous women experience spousal violence. This family violence negatively impacts the mental health and well being of women and children who experience violence as victims or witnesses.[20] Women transitioning out of abusive relationships require substantial support services but often experience barriers to accessing long-term income support and stable housing. They also frequently lack the education and skills to transition into the labour force, requiring extensive pre-employment training. Additionally, the lack of education and skills required for successful transitions into the labour force often delays or discourages many urban Indigenous women from exiting violent family situations.

Indigenous women and families face significant barriers to transitioning into PSE or employment after parental leave. There is a lack of quality, culturally-appropriate and affordable child care spaces in Ontario. Child care costs disproportionally impact urban Indigenous communities who face unique socio-economic barriers and have unique family structures. Indigenous families, for example, have higher rates of unemployment[21] and earn less income than their non-Indigenous counterparts.[22] Indigenous women are more likely to be teen parents,[23] to be lone parents,[24] and to have more children than non-Indigenous women.[25] Without adequate child care, Indigenous families are at far greater risk of housing insecurity, unemployment, low education, and lower overall health and well-being. Improving child care for Indigenous communities will help Indigenous women and families (re)enter the labour force and must be a significant dimension of provincial poverty reduction strategies.

The prevalence of racism and discrimination in urban centres is a significant problem that compounds the other systemic barriers to employment. Racism has long-term effects on urban Indigenous people, including their mental health and ability to obtain housing, complete educational certifications and training, and transition into the workforce. Racism is highly experienced in educational and workplace settings where negative stereotypes of Indigenous people and culture have serious repercussions on

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[20] Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres, *OFIFC Submission to the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario* (Toronto, ON: Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres, 2011). Available from http://www.ofifc.org/pdf/20110809_OFIFC_Submission_to_the_Commission_for_the_Review_of_Social_Assistance_in_Ontario.pdf

[21] Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, Canada-Ontario Labour Market Agreement 2013-14 Annual Plan (Toronto: Queen's Publisher for Ontario, 2014). http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/training/labmark/LMA_Plan2013_14.html

[22] Statistics Canada. Aboriginal Income Disparity in Canada (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2013). https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/DAM/DAM-INTER-HQ-AI/STAGING/texte-text/rs_re_brief_incomedisparity-PDF_1378400531873_eng.pdf

[23] Statistics Canada. First Nations, Inuit and Métis Women (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2011). http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-503-x/2010001/article/11442-eng.htm#a11

[24] Ibid

[25] Statistics Canada, Projections of the Aboriginal Population and Households in Canada, 2011 to 2036 (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2015). http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/91-552-x/91-552-x2015001-eng.pdf

self-esteem and identity. Additionally, the mainstream educational curriculum and system does not foster positive self-identity, nor does it reflect the needs, of urban Indigenous learners, namely the lack of acknowledgement of intergenerational trauma, lack of culturally relevant and wholistic curriculum, presence of systemic racism, and lack of positive Indigenous role models.[26] As a result, many urban Indigenous youth become disengaged from school and drop out, which negatively impacts their transition into post-secondary education, training, and employment.

Urban Indigenous people experience a number of serious physical and mental health issues which affect their ability to complete education and training, as well as obtain and retain employment. The Urban Aboriginal Task Force (2007) attributes many of the health issues "to a lack of an awareness and understanding of the teachings of traditional [Indigenous] culture; as cultural supports and cultural continuity are associated with good physical and mental health."[27] Additionally, drug and alcohol addictions are often symptoms of underlying mental health illnesses.

Compounding the inter-related systemic barriers is the lack of urban Indigenous-specific employment programs and services under Employment Ontario, Ontario Works, and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). The lack of Indigenous-specific services and delivery agents within the aforementioned programs increases the challenges associated with transitioning into the labour market for urban Indigenous people. Provincial government-funded employment services delivery sites are geared towards the general public and do not necessarily have staff with the training, resources or capacity to provide culturally sensitive and appropriate services to the urban Indigenous population nor is the urban Indigenous context taken into consideration in the development of services. As a result, urban Indigenous people continue to face systemic challenges, in particular racism, which results in urban Indigenous client discomfort and poor employment outcomes within Employment Ontario, Ontario Works, and ODSP.

The various intersecting challenges faced by urban Indigenous people work together to delay successful and sustainable engagement in the labour force. Addressing the intersecting challenges facing urban Indigenous people will therefore require strategic, coordinated and wholistic approaches.

Strategy Goal 3: Supporting Urban Indigenous Youth

The urban Indigenous population is a growing and young population. By the year 2026, the median age of the Indigenous population will be 31 compared to the median age of 43.3 for the non-Indigenous population.[28] According to the *Horizons* Report

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[26] Emily Faries, Closing the Gap for Aboriginal Learners. Presentation at the 2009 Ontario Education Research Symposium, 2009. Available at: http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/research/eFaries.pdf
[27] OFIFC, OMAA and ONWA., *Urban Aboriginal Task Force (UATF) Final Report* (Toronto, ON: OFIFC, OMAA, and ONWA, 2007).
[28] Dominique O'Rourke, *#GenerationFlux: Understanding the Seismic Shifts that are Shaking Canada's Youth* (Ottawa, ON: Community Foundations of Canada,2012). 8.

entitled “Hope or Heartbreak: Aboriginal Youth and Canada’s Future”:

> Between 2001 and 2026, more than 600,000 [Indigenous] youth will come of age to enter the labour market […]. Five provinces, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia will each see approximately 100,000 or more [Indigenous] youth turning 15 over that time period.[29]

Considering the existing challenges faced by urban Indigenous people in relation to poverty, educational attainment, mental health and housing, this urban Indigenous youth demographic will require additional social supports to ensure successful entry into and retention in the Ontario labour force.

Indigenous youth, aged 15 to 24, have the highest unemployment rates within the Ontario urban Indigenous population.[30] This is of critical concern when transitioning from education into the labour market as youth often have little to no employment experience. Ensuring urban Indigenous youth have access to educational and training opportunities, as well as experiential learning and work experience, will better position them to become actively involved in the Ontario labour force.

As the Ontario labour market progresses into a knowledge economy, an increasing number of jobs are requiring post-secondary credentials. Urban Indigenous youth need to be provided with more cultural-based learning opportunities to ensure they complete high school. Without the completion of high school, employment and training opportunities become increasingly limited. Urban Indigenous youth benefit greatly from the ASSPs in Friendship Centres across the province. ASSPs support urban Indigenous students who deal with multiple challenges affecting academic achievement by providing access to supports that include culturally relevant curriculum and traditional healing.

Urban Indigenous youth sometimes lack awareness regarding admission requirements to post- secondary programs and the skills or education required for different careers. As such, many urban Indigenous youth do not have the necessary credentials to pursue post-secondary education and training, including trades and apprenticeships. Strong foundational skills in science, mathematics and English are prerequisite for many post-secondary programs and employment opportunities in Ontario’s growing knowledge economy. As the use of science and technology has become highly integrated into many sectors of the economy, increasing urban Indigenous youth’s knowledge and skills within these areas is integral to successful transitions into the labour market.

Trades and apprenticeships represent an important piece in the engagement of urban Indigenous youth on their journey towards sustainable employment, financial

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[29] Jeanette Steffler, “Aboriginal Peoples: A Young Population for Years to Come,” Hope or Heartbreak: Aboriginal youth and Canada’s future. Horizons: Policy Research Initiative, 10(1) (2008). 41.
[30] Ibid.

independence and full, effective participation in the Ontario labour force. The increasing growth rate of the urban Indigenous population is occurring alongside the decline of skilled trade workers. According to Skills Canada, Ontario will face a shortage of 190,000 skilled trade workers by 2020.[31] A priority for OFIFC and Friendship Centres will be to increase the participation and success of urban Indigenous people in skilled trades and apprenticeships. However, urban Indigenous youth experience a number of substantial barriers to participation in skilled trades and apprenticeships, namely a lack of awareness of opportunities in skilled trade jobs and apprenticeships, racism and lack of educational prerequisites, low apprenticeship retention and completion rates, and lack of support from educators and family to pursue skilled trades.

Another challenge facing urban Indigenous youth entry into the Ontario labour force is the steady increase in youth poverty rates for the past two decades coupled with the increase in student debt. Between 1991 and 2007, the cost of a year's tuition in Ontario rose by more than 200%.[32] As a result, youth find themselves in positions of increasing debt and poverty which further delays key life transitions. As O'Rourke et al. note, "debt loads have an important impact on post-secondary completion rates with high debt loads breaking or delaying the transition from education to employment."[33] While recent announcements by the Government of Ontario will relieve some significant financial barriers for PSE students,[34] urban Indigenous youth will remain challenged to obtain a PSE credential when they continue to disproportionately experience high rates of poverty. This is further exacerbated by the high cost and limited availability of housing, food insecurity and other financial obligations placed on students.

Finally, there are additional supports that can assist youth in their development of economic agency, transition to the labour market, and sustainable employment. Providing opportunities that enable the youth 'voice' through youth activism, such as youth-run conferences, youth councils, and youth-run social activities, can increase self-esteem, promote leadership, help build networks, and promote the development of transferable skills.

Addressing the challenges faced by urban Indigenous youth in accessing the education to employment continuum are vast. Figure 2 outlines three stages of supports that should be provided to youth to support success in the labour market.

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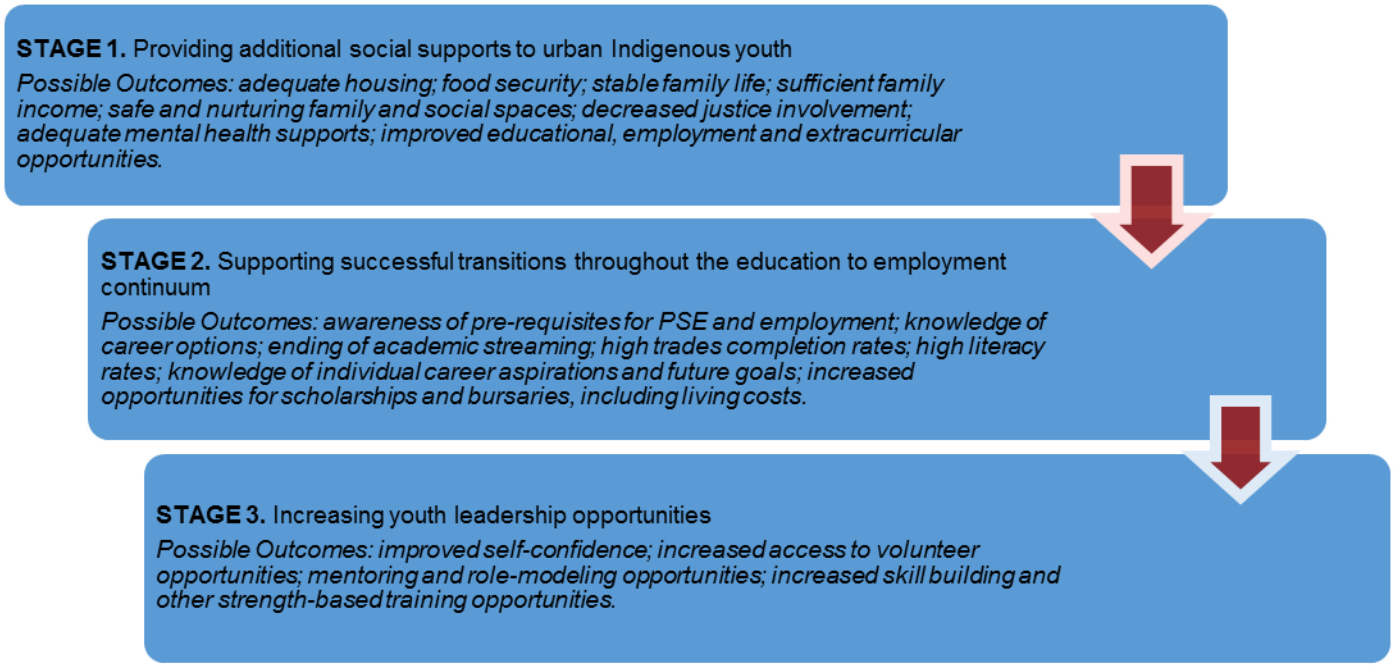
[31] Skills Canada, "What's Out There in the Skilled Trades and Technologies" Fact Sheet www.skillsontario.ca.
[32] Dominique O'Rourke, *#GenerationFlux: Understanding the Seismic Shifts that are Shaking Canada's Youth* (Ottawa, ON: Community Foundations of Canada, 2012). 3.
[33] Dominique O'Rourke, *#GenerationFlux: Understanding the Seismic Shifts that are Shaking Canada's Youth* (Ottawa, ON: Community Foundations of Canada, 2012).
[34] Government of Ontario, Jobs for Today and Tomorrow, 2016 Ontario Budget (Toronto, ON: Queens Printer of Ontario, 2016).

Figure 3: A Staged Approach to Supporting Urban Indigenous Youth



Strategy Goal 4: Addressing the Gaps within the Education to Employment Continuum

The high incidence of unemployment, or underemployment, and the low levels of educational attainment of urban Indigenous people highlight gaps within the education to employment continuum. Urban Indigenous people, youth in particular, face considerable challenges in their transitions from education to employment, including racism, lack of culturally relevant curriculum, and the lack of access to positive Indigenous role models. For many urban Indigenous people the gaps within the education to employment continuum begin in the early school years, compounded by years of systemic discrimination.

Urban Indigenous people experience three distinct stages of engagement in relation to the education to employment continuum, each with a unique set of challenges:

Figure 4. A Staged View of the Education to Employment Continuum

In addition to the challenges presented within Figure 4, systemic challenges also have a significant impact on the transitions along the education to employment continuum. These include racism and the lack of culturally inclusive educational and work spaces. The underlying discrimination, lack of awareness of Indigenous culture among the non-Indigenous population, and lack of culturally relevant spaces make it difficult for urban Indigenous people, especially, youth, to foster positive Indigenous identities, which impacts the transition to employment and retention within employment. Additionally, poverty, unsecure housing, and homelessness have been found to have a reinforcing effect on the barriers to education and employment.

These systemic challenges are present within each stage and it is crucial to recognise the inter-relatedness of each stage along the education to employment continuum. Although shown as stages, they do not transition linearly from one stage to the next, but instead are intertwined with one another in ways that require wholistic and intersecting approaches. Successful transition into meaningful and sustainable employment is influenced by increased educational attainment, with some level of post-secondary certification gradually becoming the minimum requirement. Supporting cultural-based urban Indigenous educational initiatives, such as the Alternative Secondary School Program (ASSP), to increase educational attainment will increase labour force participation, reduce unemployment, decrease reliance on income support programs, increase income, and result in higher job retention.

While it is important to increase educational attainment at the high school and post-secondary level, it is also crucial to address the challenges within the early stages of the education to employment continuum. Urban Indigenous youth often become

disengaged from a young age. As such, the link between education and employment needs to be present in early childhood education, K-12, and through to post-secondary to ensure urban Indigenous people have the skills and knowledge necessary to transition into the labour force.

A major service gap in urban Indigenous communities is the lack of affordable culturally-appropriate child care centres. Increasing access to culturally appropriate child care will alleviate parental stress and coupled with parenting programming, reinforces parenting skills, coping mechanisms, and general family well-being. It is also a critical strategy to empowering and ending violence against Indigenous women. Culturally appropriate child care, which incorporates language and culture into curriculum and involves community members such as Elders, fosters positive cultural identity in early years and is a building block to future student success.[35] Increasing access to culturally-appropriate child care, particularly by proliferating child care programming in Friendship Centres, will undoubtedly improve transitions throughout the education to employment continuum.

Additionally, the Apatisiwin Employment and Training Program, within Friendship Centres, addresses the challenges faced by urban Indigenous people along the education to employment continuum. Apatisiwin represents the needs of the urban Indigenous community by helping them to gain the education, experience, and skills needed to achieve and maintain sustainable employment. Greater integration between ASSP and Apatisiwin programs will facilitate successful transitions from education to employment for urban Indigenous people.

When addressing the inter-related challenges of the education to employment continuum, mechanisms need to be integrated to address the barriers of urban Indigenous people who have disengaged, at various points, from the continuum, for example adults who struggle with illiteracy. In fact, almost half of Canadian adults do not possess level 3 literacy skills – the minimal level for working in today's complex knowledge and information economy.[36] Further, urban Indigenous people score lower than non-Indigenous people in literacy testing.[37] For Indigenous people, the impacts of illiteracy and low basic skills can be substantial on their ability to not only complete training and obtain employment, but it can also lead to difficulties during initial intake procedures for pre- employment, education, and employment and training programs. Difficulty navigating the provincial employment and training services is not limited to literacy issues, but are wide-reaching and indicative of the substantial challenges inherent to the provincial system in meeting the unique needs of urban Indigenous people.

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[35] Best Start, Founded in Culture: Strategies to Promote Early Learning Among First Nations Children in Ontario (Toronto: Best Start Resource Centre, 2011) http://www.beststart.org/resources/hlthy_chld_dev/pdf/FC_K13A.pdf

[36] Statistics Canada, Employment and Social Development Canada, and the Council of Ministers of Education Canada, *Skills in Canada*: *First Results from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies* (Ottawa, ON: Minister of Industry, 2013).

[37] Ibid.

The challenges experienced by urban Indigenous people along the education to employment continuum are significantly different from those experienced by the non-Indigenous population and, thus, require actions and approaches that are Indigenous specific and wholistic. This is especially important given that the urban Indigenous population is the fastest growing in Ontario. OFIFC has already taken steps towards addressing the education to employment continuum by advocating for, and commencing the development of, a Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs' Urban Aboriginal Off-Reserve Policy Engagement Table (UAORPET) to address issues specific to urban Indigenous people in Ontario. The first task of the UAORPET will be to address the continuum of services between education and employment.

Moving Forward

Moving forward, an action plan will be created to guide the OFIFC and Friendship Centres' work on making meaningful strides toward achieving the four strategic goals. It is vital that creative approaches are applied to existing programming and OFIFC advocacy to capitalise on available resources while maximising outcomes for urban Indigenous people.