



OFIFC

Ontario Federation of
Indigenous Friendship Centres

***OFIFC's Response to the Premier's Highly
Skilled Workforce Expert Panel***

March 2016

ABOUT THE ONTARIO FEDERATION OF INDIGENOUS FRIENDSHIP CENTRES

The Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres (OFIFC) is a provincial Indigenous organisation representing the collective interests of 28 member Friendship Centres located in towns and cities throughout Ontario. 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 respects Indigenous cultural distinctiveness.

The OFIFC administers a number of wholistic, culture-based programs and initiatives which are delivered by local Friendship Centres in areas such as justice, children and youth, health, family support, long term care, healing and wellness, education, and employment and training. Friendship Centres respond to the needs of tens of thousands of community members requiring culture-based services every day.

The Friendship Centres represent the most significant off-reserve Indigenous service infrastructure in Ontario and are dedicated to achieving greater participation of all urban Indigenous peoples in all facets of society, inclusive of First Nation – Status/Non-Status, Métis, Inuit and all other people who identify as Indigenous. The OFIFC manages \$45 million in direct delivery funding across the province, not taking into account the direct resources procured by Friendship Centres at the community level.¹

KEY FACTS:

- **84.1 percent of Indigenous people in Ontario live off-reserve.**
(Source: Statistics Canada. (2011) *National Household Survey*.)
- **Between 2006 and 2011, Ontario's Indigenous population grew five times faster than the non-Indigenous population, increasing 24.3 percent compared to 4.8 percent.**
(Source: Ministry of Finance. (2013). *2011 National Household Survey Highlights: Factsheet 3*.)
- **33.9 percent of the Indigenous in Ontario are under the age of 19, compared to 23.8 percent of the non-Indigenous population.**
(Statistics Canada. (2011). *National Household Survey*.)
- **In 2012, the unemployment rate of off-reserve Indigenous youth in Ontario was 23.5 percent compared to 16.8 percent for the non-Indigenous youth population.**
(Source: Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities. (2013). *Canada-Ontario Labour Market Agreement, 2013-14 Annual Plan*.)
- **In 2012, the unemployment rate of off-reserve Indigenous people (aged 25-54) was 9.2 percent compared to 6.3 percent for their non-Indigenous counterparts in Ontario.**
(Source: Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities. (2013). *Canada-Ontario Labour Market Agreement, 2013-14 Annual Plan*.)

¹ Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres., *Annual Report 2012/2013* (Toronto, ON: Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres, 2013). 47.

THE CHALLENGES AND POTENTIALS OF URBAN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES IN ONTARIO

As the youngest and fastest growing population in Ontario, it is critical to consider the unique challenges faced by urban Indigenous people when developing a provincial highly skilled workforce strategy in Ontario. In fact, 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. Indigenous people in Ontario have a significantly lower median age than the non-Indigenous population, 24.5 compared to 37.2.² Further, more than 50 percent of Ontario's Indigenous population is under the age of twenty-seven³ and the Indigenous population is growing at nearly double the rate of the non-Indigenous population, 1.8 percent compared to 1 percent.⁴ As a result of the growing urban Indigenous population, it is estimated that more than 100,000 Indigenous youth will come of age to enter the labour market by 2026.⁵

Recognizing 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. Research on the labour market trends in Ontario indicates that Ontario will be facing a labour and skills shortage, in large part due to an aging population.⁶ Contrarily, the urban Indigenous population is growing exponentially and represents a critical population that, with the adequate investments in culturally-appropriate education and training, and tangential supports such as housing and mental health, can help to address the labour shortage.

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.⁷ Clearly, the education, training and employment-support programs and services delivered by the provincial government are not meeting the needs of urban Indigenous people. Programs and services need to be more efficiently and rationally operated to increase the impact and effectiveness of transitioning urban Indigenous people into meaningful, long-term employment and secure sustainable income.

² Government of Ontario., *Breaking the Cycle, Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy* (Toronto, ON: Government of Ontario, 2008). 15.

³ Ibid.

⁴ 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): 14.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Rick Miner., *People Without Jobs – Jobs Without People: Ontario's Labour Market Future* (Toronto, ON: Miner Management Consultants, 2010).

⁷ Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities., *Canada-Ontario Labour Market Agreement, 2013-14 Annual Plan* (Toronto, ON: Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2013).

For over forty years the OFIFC has worked towards advancing urban Indigenous social and economic issues with all levels of government. Friendship Centres play a crucial role in supporting urban Indigenous people through the provision of key services to improve outcomes and increase opportunities. It is in large part due to such efforts, and federal and provincial investments, that a proportion of urban Indigenous people are considered middle income earners in the province of Ontario,⁸ a rather recent phenomenon that must be both sustained and increased.

While the upward socio-economic mobility of one segment of the urban Indigenous community represents an impressive milestone, a far larger proportion of urban Indigenous families continue to experience poor socio-economic standings. Urban Indigenous people continue to experience challenges transitioning along the education to employment continuum, which results in higher rates of precarious employment, lower earned incomes, lower rates of educational attainment, and an over representation in minimum wage employment for urban Indigenous people in comparison to their non-Indigenous counterparts.

Strategic and Indigenous-specific resources and programs must be available to meet the needs of the young and growing urban Indigenous population. This will require effective collaboration from the different levels of government and coordination with urban Indigenous service providers, namely Friendship Centres, to support urban Indigenous people in improving their economic outcomes. With access to culturally-appropriate education and training, the urban Indigenous population can provide a sustainable solution to the anticipated skilled labour shortages. This would also support increased economic agency among urban Indigenous people and communities in Ontario.

⁸ In 2007, more than 22 percent of Urban Aboriginal Task Force (UATF) respondents belonged to the middle class. OFIFC, OMAA and ONWA., *Urban Aboriginal Task Force (UATF) Final Report* (Toronto, ON: OFIFC, OMAA, and ONWA, 2007).

OFIFC'S PRIORITY FOR BUILDING A HIGHLY SKILLED WORKFORCE STRATEGY

The OFIFC believes that a key priority of the Premier's Highly Skilled Workforce Expert Panel (Expert Panel) should be closing the education and employment attainment gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Ontarians. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada has also called on the federal government to develop a joint strategy with Indigenous groups to eliminate these gaps.⁹ To achieve this, a wholistic approach must be applied to the development of the Highly Skilled Workforce Strategy, whereby investments are made in all stages of the education to employment continuum. To date, the vast majority of provincial investments in education and training initiatives have focused on mainstream approaches and services for individuals most employment-ready. This has meant that there have been comparatively few services for at-risk populations such as urban Indigenous youth, and where they do exist, programs are inefficient, ineffective, poorly designed and executed, and have been developed in isolation from community service providers and organisations.

Research conducted by the Centre for the Study of Living Standards (CSLS) in 2010 found that there would be vast economic benefits if the educational and labour market outcomes of Indigenous people in Canada reached the 2006 levels of non-Indigenous Canadians. If this was achieved by 2026, a potential addition of \$36.5 billion to the national GDP, and a \$14.2 billion decrease in government expenditures would be a result of eliminating the social well-being gaps that exist for Indigenous people in Canada.¹⁰

It is important to acknowledge the relationship between the socio-economic gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Ontarians and the widely acknowledged disparity in educational and employment outcomes. As such, focus must be given to the reasons why an achievement gap exists, largely a result of disenfranchisement, disadvantage and dispossession that Indigenous people have experienced in Canada historically and continue to experience. Increased investments in culturally-appropriate education, training, and provincial employment supports, along with tangential supports targeted at improving socio-economic conditions, can help to contribute to a highly skilled workforce.

The OFIFC welcomes the proposed financial supports for low-income students to obtain post-secondary education (PSE)¹¹, however urban Indigenous youth will remain challenged to join a highly skilled workforce, or obtain a PSE credential, when they

⁹ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada., *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action* (Winnipeg, MB: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

¹⁰ The Centre for the Study of Living Standards., *Investing in Aboriginal Education in Canada: An Economic Perspective*, (Ottawa, ON: Centre for the Study of Living Standards, 2010).

¹¹ Government of Ontario., *Jobs for Today and Tomorrow, 2016 Ontario Budget* (Toronto, ON: Queens Printer of Ontario, 2016).

continue to disproportionately experience high rates of poverty.¹² The OFIFC is committed to working with the provincial government to make meaningful strides in poverty reduction and narrowing socio-economic, education, and employment gaps.

OFIFC'S RESPONSE TO CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

1. *What type of workforce does Ontario need to adapt to the demands of a technology-driven knowledge economy? Is the highly skilled workforce description, as defined in the previous section, the best definition for Ontario? If not, how should it change? What is missing? What indicators would best measure progress?*

The Government of Ontario should work to build an environment that creates space for recognising unconventional expertise. In practice, this would require shifting business culture and practices to acknowledge different ways of doing things, for example, recognising and valuing Indigenous approaches to biology and chemistry. Further, a highly skilled workforce will be culturally competent and will actively work to limit experiences of racism and discrimination. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has called on the private sector to ensure that Indigenous people have access to jobs, training, and education opportunities in the corporate sector while also providing skills based training in intercultural competency, conflict resolution, human rights, and anti-racism for management and staff.¹³

In regard to the Expert Panel's highly skilled workforce description, the OFIFC agrees with the list of traits and skills but believes that 'emotional intelligence/understanding of the impact of emotions on others'¹⁴ should include 'trauma-informed' practices at a personal, professional and organisational level. A trauma-informed system can recognize the presence of trauma symptoms and promote healing environments through trauma-informed practices predicated upon: safety; trust; collaboration; choice and empowerment; and the building of strengths and skills.¹⁵

¹² Indigenous youth represent 2.8 percent of Ontario's population but represent **more than 18 percent of children in care** (Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, 2014); between 2007 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 (Professionally Speaking, 2013); **36 percent of off-reserve Indigenous children under the age of 6 live in poverty** compared to 19 percent of non-Indigenous Children (Statistics Canada, 2006); **Indigenous boys aged 12-17 are incarcerated at a rate five times higher** than their share of the general population in Ontario and the **proportion of Indigenous girls in Ontario jails is 10.7 times higher** than their share of the general population (Toronto Star, 2013); and according to OFIFC research, **79 percent of respondents indicated that they worried about running out of food, 35 percent of their children had gone hungry, 11 percent reported that their children had missed school because there was no food, and 7 percent reported that they had been involved with Children and Family Services because of food shortage** (OFIFC, 2003).

¹³ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada., *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action* (Winnipeg, MB: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

¹⁴ Premier's Highly Skilled Workforce Expert Panel., *Lifelong Learning: Growing Our Highly Skilled Workforce* (Toronto, ON: Premier's Highly Skilled Workforce Expert Panel, 2016). 10.

¹⁵ British Columbia Provincial Mental Health and Substance Use Planning Council., *Trauma Informed Practice Guide* (Vancouver, BC: BC Provincial Mental Health and Substance Use Planning Council, 2013).

In addition, the list of indicators included in the discussion document is a great improvement from the original list that predominately focused on business growth. The OFIFC would also propose the following indicators: degree of social stability; sustained levels of growth; levels of civic engagement; income security; employment security; decreased justice and child welfare involvement; increased education attainment (beginning in grade one); decreased instances of unsupported mental health and addictions; decreased occurrences of family violence; and housing security. Recognising the correlation between poor socio-economic outcomes and attainment gaps in education and employment, these additional indicators are important measures of a highly skilled workforce.

2. What partnerships are needed to support development of a highly skilled workforce?

A wholistic approach to developing a highly skilled workforce will require extensive partnerships with urban Indigenous not-for-profit organisations, such as the OFIFC, Friendship Centres and the Métis Nation of Ontario (MNO); the federal government; Consolidated Municipal Service Managers (CMSMs); District Social Services Administration Boards (DSSABs); municipalities; and Employment Ontario (EO) service providers. The Expert Panel should work to facilitate partnerships between these community organisations, PSE institutions and the broader non-profit and culture sectors. Partnerships must ensure there is accountability at all levels, especially within local community. This means that partnerships are thoughtful and purposeful endeavours that are mutually beneficial with partners sharing a common goal.

3. How are employers and educational institutions preparing workers and learners for an increasingly digital and technological world?

At present, workers and learners are poorly trained and ill-prepared to meaningfully engage in the workforce. Too much emphasis is placed on teaching digital and technical skills, while not enough on critical thinking and analysis. Critical thinking and analysis skills enable individuals to use technology effectively and to envision and create new ways to use technology. Learners need to be trained in ‘soft’ skills, in addition to specific technological skills. Ongoing research by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) has indicated that employers are looking for employees with a skillset that includes “communicating, problem-solving, critical thinking, [and] teamwork”.¹⁶ A recent survey has found that the majority of education providers (83 percent) in Canada believe that youth are adequately prepared for the workforce, while only 44 percent of youth and 34 percent of employers believe youth are prepared.¹⁷

¹⁶ Louise Brown, “Young grads need to brush up on 3 Rs, employers say.” *Toronto Star*, February 22, 2016, GTA, online edition. Accessed online: <http://www.thestar.com/yourtoronto/education/2016/02/22/young-grads-need-to-brush-up-on-3-rs-employers-say.html>.

¹⁷ McKinsey and Company., *Youth in transition: Bridging Canada’s path from education to employment* (Toronto, ON: McKinsey and Company, 2015).

The lack of employment readiness is often attributed to insufficient 'soft' skills. In Ontario's current system, 'soft' skills are often developed outside of school through the involvement in extra-curricular activities, sport teams, and other fee-for-service activities. As such it is important to consider learning methods that support the development of teamwork, communication, problem-solving and critical thinking for all students regardless of income levels or location. The cost of such activities, a lack of transportation, racism and discrimination, and the lack of opportunities in small communities limits urban Indigenous families from participating in these valuable activities. While Friendship Centres, and other urban Indigenous not-for-profit community organisations work to provide opportunities for children youth to develop these skills, they are often limited by insufficient funding, narrow program requirements and a lack of needed infrastructure. It is important that learners, PSE institutions, not-for-profit organisations and employers seek better alignment and understanding of labour market requirements and workforce expectations and commit to inclusive ways to develop these skills.

Current federal programming targeting employer involvement in skill development is insufficient in meeting the needs of at-risk individuals, including urban Indigenous people. In 2013, the Government of Canada replaced the Labour Market Agreements (LMA) with the Canada-Ontario Job Fund Agreement. Recognising the lack of employer involvement in training, the primary program offered through this new agreement is the Canada Ontario Job Grant (COJG), an employer-driven program through which employers identify the short-term training needs and the recipients of this training. While both EI eligible and non-EI eligible individuals are eligible for support through the COJG, as an employer-driven program, it will likely favour job-ready individuals and do little to address the systematic racism that urban Indigenous people face in seeking employment or employment preparedness. In addition, even with a job offer, without support for indirect costs, such as transportation and child care, some individuals, particularly single parents and youth will face significant challenges in completing needed training, especially in cases of out-of-town training.

Government programs that increase employer engagement are valuable and needed, however it is concerning that the implementation of the COJG ended the consistent multi-year funding for the most vulnerable people on the education and employment continuum, including urban Indigenous people. In fact, as a result of this shift in programming, by 2017/2018, the majority of transfer-funded labour market programs will be geared to EI-eligible, employment ready clients. It will be important for the Expert Panel to establish an appropriate balance between upskilling the existing workforce, providing training for job-ready individuals, and facilitating extensive training and employment supports for those furthest from entering the workforce.

4. Ensuring supply meets demand is a tenet of any successful economy. Employers report being unable to find skilled job candidates. Research also suggests that Canadian businesses are investing less than other countries in workplace training. What can employers do to support the knowledge based economy?

Training systems that support learners who are more comfortable in non-conventional settings or who have different learning methods have found success in other jurisdictions. These jurisdictions have extensive apprenticeship training systems that integrate workplace and classroom training on a weekly basis, extensively involve the private sector, and are promoted as a viable option for younger students. This type of work integrated learning would likely better support Indigenous learners, who are often challenged to remain engaged in the conventional learning system for a variety of reasons including financial and family obligations and the daily challenges of poverty including a lack of transportation, food and housing insecurities. These types of inclusive, work integrated learning systems contrast against Ontario's fractured apprenticeship and PSE systems that are disconnected from labour market needs and elementary and secondary school systems.

As indicated above, the lack of employer involvement in training is a significant barrier to skills training in Ontario. When considering ways in which employers can support the creation of a highly skilled workforce, it is important to consider the high rates of racism and discrimination that is experienced by Indigenous people in education and employment. According to the Urban Aboriginal Task Force, 24 percent of respondents reported experiencing racism in schools and 21 percent in the workplace.¹⁸ 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 such as racism and discrimination in mainstream institutions or were influenced to pursue careers to which they were most exposed like, for example, education.¹⁹ While not explicitly stated in the Indspire survey, Indigenous graduates are likely also influenced to join Indigenous-led organisations based on perceptions of workplace environments – seeking an environment of inclusiveness and a sense of belonging rather than workplace environments that continually challenge their cultural identity where experiences of continued racism and discrimination are ongoing. As such, it is important that mainstream employers consider the cultural competency of their workplace and take concrete steps to creating inclusive and non-discriminatory environments.

While these systematic changes will have substantial benefits for all learners and job-seekers, including Indigenous people, the OFIFC believes that it is important to broaden 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

¹⁸ OFIFC, OMAA and ONWA., *Urban Aboriginal Task Force (UATF) Final Report* (Toronto, ON: OFIFC, OMAA, and ONWA, 2007).

¹⁹ Indspire, *Creating Positive Outcomes: Graduation and Employment Rates of Indspire's Financial Award Recipients* (Ohsweken, ON: Indspire, 2015).

referred to, and continue to be referred to, as an investment in economic growth.²⁰ 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. It is important that Ontario's education and training system (from early childhood through to post-secondary and work-placed learning) supports and nurtures individual aspirations and career goals. The OFIFC believes that as the education and training system, along with individual employers, become more culturally competent and responsive to the needs and competencies of Indigenous youth, Indigenous youth will become increasingly better prepared to meet the needs of Ontario's labour market. Further, it is also imperative that opportunities are created for urban Indigenous youth to discover their own career aspirations through fostering imagination, creativity, and knowledge of individual strengths and various means of interacting with Ontario's labour market.

5. *What existing policies, programs or initiatives to create a highly skilled workforce can be scaled up or broadened to reach more people?*

The OFIFC's response to question five focuses on ways in which current policies, programs and initiatives can be used to narrow socio-economic, education and employment gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

Broadening Primary and Secondary School Education

An increasing emphasis is being placed on "higher order skills" internationally within both the public and private sectors;²¹ and the need to broaden the teaching focus from the traditional 'reading, writing and arithmetic' to developing socio-emotional skills, critical problem solving skills, creativity and innovation, citizenship skills and developing a general sense of well-being. The current measurements of student success (EQAO and graduation rates) must also evolve to recognise the linkages between educational attainment and socio-economic conditions and represent the development goals of urban Indigenous communities. Measurements of success should include: increased knowledge of Indigenous cultures, food security, access to healthy and traditional foods, access to mental health supports, positive student self-identity and that students see themselves positively reflected in their formal education experience and environment, etc. The OFIFC believes that Ontario's public schools should be better supporting the development of wholistic, community-focused, lifelong Indigenous learners that are centred physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually.

Evidence shows that arts education fosters student engagement and achievement, teaches students to express themselves, work in a team, to take risks and learn about various cultures. Arts education is often utilized by teachers to make learning the

²⁰ Michael Mendelson, *Aboriginal People in Canada's Labour Market: Work and Unemployment, Today and Tomorrow* (Ottawa, ON: Caledon Institute for Social Policy, 2004).

²¹ People for Education., *Broader Measures of Success: Measuring What Matters in Education* (Toronto: People for Education, 2013).

curriculum more engaging and culturally appropriate for Indigenous students.²² Arts provides a space for Indigenous student to negotiate their identities, critically reflect on their place in the world, harness the resiliency of their culture, and foster creativity and imagination. While, Ontario has a compulsory curriculum for visual arts, drama, dance and music, only a minority of schools have specialist teachers.²³ The inequitable access to qualified arts teachers should also be addressed. For example, in 2013, 62% of elementary schools in the GTA had music teachers compared to 26% in northern Ontario and 32% in eastern Ontario. Other factors affecting access to arts-enriched learning include family income, school fundraising revenues, and school size.²⁴ Furthermore, the provincial curriculum is not culturally appropriate and fails to capture the spiritual dimension of Indigenous art and its foundation in Indigenous relations in the world.

Recognising that teamwork, creativity, and communication skills are often cited by employers as essential skills for employees, the Government of Ontario should consider ways in which to increase funding to the arts and ensure there is equitable access for all students across the province. Improving the provincial arts curriculum and ensuring accessibility to arts education Ontario's public schools and improving the arts curriculum are important steps to retaining Indigenous students, fostering positive self-identity, improving the cultural competency of Ontarians and developing key skills that Indigenous students need to be productive members of their community.

As well, the Government of Ontario should consider increasing access to life skills training in primary and secondary schools through revamped home economics courses. These courses can support increased levels of self-sufficiency by teaching skills in food and nutrition, financial literacy, and budgeting. These are skills that all students should have access to, and primary and secondary schools are well-positioned to equip students with basic life skills that are required to achieve self-sufficiency throughout life. This is particularly relevant for Indigenous students, who often experience higher rates of poverty and child welfare involvement. As a result, Indigenous youth may not have other opportunities outside of school to gain these important and valuable skills.

Further, students are often unaware of admission requirements to post-secondary programs, the skills or education required for different career paths, and can be highly influenced by parents, teachers and guidance counsellors. This is further exacerbated for Indigenous students as a result of streaming practices used by primary and secondary school systems throughout Ontario. In fact, in some schools with high percentages of applied students, these students were 3.7 times more likely to be Indigenous.²⁵ This outdated practice limits urban Indigenous students from future employment opportunities, recognising the requirements of academic level Math and/or

²² Shauna Bruno, *The Royal Conservatory, Learning Through the Arts Youth Empowerment Program in the Wood Buffalo Region - In-class Program with the Fort McMurray Catholic School District* (Ohsweken, ON: Indspire, 2014).

²³ People for Education., *The Arts in Ontario Schools* (Toronto, ON: People for Education, 2013).

²⁴ People for Education., *The Arts in Ontario Schools* (Toronto, ON: People for Education, 2013).

²⁵ People for Education, *The Trouble with Course Choices in Ontario High Schools* (Toronto, ON: People for Education, 2013).

English courses for many university, college and trades programs. Considering the lasting impacts streaming can have on urban Indigenous students, it is critical for the MTCU, Ministry of Education (EDU), District School Boards to engage with local and provincial urban Indigenous organisations with the goal of ending this outdated practice. Should Indigenous students continue to be overrepresented in applied level high school courses, the development of a highly skilled workforce will be stalled, and the need for responsive intervention services later in life, such as social services and Employment Ontario's (EO) programs will rise significantly with this growing population.

Expanding the Alternative Secondary School Program

In order to address socio-economic gaps and education and employment attainment, work must be done to better support urban Indigenous high school students. According to the most recent data on Grade 10 credit accumulation, 45 percent of Indigenous students are on track to graduate compared to 74 percent of non-Indigenous students.²⁶ Additional resources should be re-allocated by the EDU towards supporting and expanding the Alternative Secondary Schools Program (ASSP) in Friendship Centre communities in Ontario.

In 2014-15, the ASSP granted 1137 credits and graduated 101 students, nearly half of whom are now attending a post-secondary institution. The ASSP works to address systemic barriers to Indigenous student achievement and low-income students in a variety of ways and contributes significantly to poverty reduction. ASSPs aim to meet the transportation, food, and other basic needs of their students mediating some of the challenges that poverty has on daily learning for many Indigenous students. Increasing investment to ASSPs and expanding ASSPs to all Friendship Centres that demonstrate both the need and the capacity will no doubt play a significant role in preparing urban Indigenous youth to become part of the highly skilled workforce.

In order to further improve the ASSP's delivery of quality education programming for urban Indigenous communities, it is vital that teachers and administrative staff have the appropriate skills and knowledge of urban Indigenous health and mental health issues. There is a need for additional specialised staff in certain schools with high proportions of Individual Education Plan (IEP) students given the added support that IEP students require. Additionally, more work is required to ensure that students with developmental disabilities are assessed early and that transition planning from early years to kindergarten reflects mental health assessments, is accountable to Indigenous community members and parents/caregivers, and is informed by culturally appropriate practices in child care and early learning.

Envisioning a Responsive PSE Sector²⁷

While recent announcements by the Government of Ontario will relieve some significant financial barriers for PSE students, barriers remain for current and prospective post-

²⁶ Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, Education of Aboriginal Students: Follow up to VFM Section 3.05, 2012 Report (Toronto: Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2014).

²⁷ More detailed recommendations for improving the PSE sector can be found in the Appendix which was previously submitted to the Expert Panel in a response to question 5.

secondary students. Specifically, the provincial government, PSE institutions and urban Indigenous organisations must work together to ensure the PSE system is responsive to the needs of Indigenous students and communities.

The Government of Ontario should ensure that a re-engagement strategy is created and implemented by the MTCU to engage with the urban Indigenous community at all stages of the lifecycle to encourage PSE as a viable option for community members. Many Indigenous students will leave school due to a variety of socio-economic circumstances, including financial concerns and commitments, housing instability, care for family members and involvement with the justice system. Urban Indigenous youth and mature students require specific and often multiple supports to make the transition back to school. Further, the MTCU should also facilitate meaningful engagement between OFIFC, member Friendship Centres and postsecondary institutions. This can be most effectively achieved via provincial and institution Aboriginal Education Councils (AECs) and requiring that they have urban Indigenous community representation, in order to adequately maintain accountability to the urban Indigenous communities in which they are located.

Provincial dialogue should also begin on the employment and training needs of urban Indigenous people through the development of a provincial strategy to better coordinate related services. Specifically, a provincial strategy should call for coordination between the federally funded Aboriginal Skills and Employment Strategy (ASETS) employment and training program at Friendship Centres and the Aboriginal Post Secondary Education and Training Policy Framework (APSET).

Major reforms to Provincial Employment and Training Services²⁸

Employment and training supports offered by the provincial government are often failing to meet the needs of urban Indigenous people who have become disengaged from the education and training system. Urban Indigenous people are accessing EO programming and services at disproportionately low numbers. In correspondence with the OFIFC, MTCU has stated that EO's Employment Services are meeting the needs of Indigenous clients as a result of the total number of Indigenous people accessing these programs (3 percent) exceeding the percentage of Indigenous people in the province (2.4 percent). Considering the number of Indigenous people living off-reserve and the fact that Indigenous people experience much higher unemployment rates, the relative success of status quo EO programs should be more critically examined by the Expert Panel. Further, it is critical that meaningful engagement is sought by the MTCU with provincial urban Indigenous organisations throughout the provincial Employment and Training Services Integration (ETSI) process.

To support the creation of a highly skilled workforce, the provincial government must coordinate employment supports with Friendship Centre services. In fact, the Provincial-Municipal Fiscal and Service Delivery Review highlights the low levels of integration among Ontario Works, Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), EO, and other

²⁸ More detailed recommendations for improving provincial employment and training services can be found in the Appendix which was previously submitted to the Expert Panel in a response to question 5.

employment support programs, namely ASETS.²⁹ As community hubs for urban Indigenous people, Friendship Centres are in a unique position to provide culturally appropriate Ontario Works, ODSP, and EO employment supports in conjunction with Apatisiwin (ASETS employment and training program). In order for Ontario to leverage the work of Friendship Centres and to effectively deliver these services in combination with Apatisiwin it will be necessary to address the infrastructure and capacity of individual centres.

Additionally, the OFIFC welcomes the recent announcement by the Government of Ontario for mandatory cultural competency training for all public servants. The province must ensure that this includes all frontline service deliverers from all government-funded employment programs, including non-government service delivery agencies. Culturally competent services require that not only frontline workers are competent but that the space where services are provided is also culturally competent, welcoming and safe. For example, in some Ontario Works offices, caseworkers remain physically separated from clients by partitioned glass. Ontario Works offices should be safe spaces for clients to bring children without fearing for their safety. Culturally competent employment and training services, combined with tangential supports, will support an increased number of urban Indigenous people to transition along the education to employment continuum.

Building on Local Responses

Urban Indigenous community based not-for-profit organisations are, and should be recognised as, the leaders in creating local strategies to meet community needs. Community based responses are well-positioned to deliver culturally competent employment and training services. For example:

- In Sioux Lookout, the Nishnawbe-Gamik Friendship Centre has worked with the local justice system to create opportunities for Indigenous people facing a sentence involving community service to be able to attend employment preparation programming, volunteer opportunities, and receive supportive services at the Friendship Centre as fulfillment of sentence requirements.
- In Midland, the Georgian Bay Native Friendship Centre partnered with the Simcoe Country District School Board to help provide training opportunities for those interested in obtaining their Personal Support Worker (PSW) Certificate through a 6 month fast track accredited program and placement. The partnership responds to a high demand for PSW's in the community and leads directly to employment. Most students have been hired directly by their placement organization while others are offered additional job search support by the Friendship Centre's Apatisiwin program.
- In Cochrane, the Ininev Friendship Centre has partnered with the Cochrane District Social Services Administration Board to provide EO Employment Services in the Friendship Centre with the understanding that place-based service delivery can increase trust between service delivery agencies and clients, while offering existing services in a culturally-safe space.

²⁹ Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing., *Provincial-Municipal Fiscal and Service Delivery Review* (Toronto, ON: Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, 2008).

Expanding community based responses should be considered a key component of the Highly Skilled Workforce Strategy. However, this cannot be accomplished without meaningful support from the provincial government, ensuring that Friendship Centres are adequately resourced to navigate and build critical local partnerships. For example, the MTCU should consider amending funding criteria or creating new funding for urban Indigenous partnerships to provide directives and incentives for EO Employment Services to coordinate with Friendship Centres.

Increased Connectivity

Regardless of changes to the education, training and employment systems, a strategy to develop a highly skilled workforce will be stalled unless infrastructure is in place that allows for equitable access these systems and services. This will require substantial investments in public transportation infrastructure that supports urban Indigenous people's participation in the economy and makes it worth being highly skilled outside of major centres such as Toronto or Ottawa. In many Friendship Centre communities, public transportation is not available locally or within the region. In communities where public transit is available, the high cost of ridership challenges, and often prevents multi-barriered community members from accessing available transportation. Without increased investments in public transportation infrastructure, multi-barriered urban Indigenous people will continue to be hard-pressed to access needed education and training supports and obtain and maintain employment. Recognising the growing need for a mobile workforce, it is important that adequate public transportation infrastructure is in place throughout Ontario and is not limited to large urban centres.

In addition to a lack of public transportation infrastructure, the development of a highly skilled workforce is challenged by the lack of reliable community not-for-profit infrastructure. Often times, not-for-profit organisations, including Friendship Centres are relied upon to deliver critical pre-employment programs, youth programs and other essential supports required to address socio-economic, education and employment gaps facing urban Indigenous children and youth.

Research shows that the majority of urban Indigenous people prefer to obtain services from Indigenous organisations over mainstream agencies based on culturally-relevant program models and a perceived higher accountability to Indigenous communities. Without reliable community-based infrastructure the critical work done by Friendship Centres and other urban Indigenous not-for-profit organisations may be jeopardised, certainly will not be optimised, and at the very least will be challenged to meet the needs of the growing urban Indigenous population. While the number of urban Indigenous organisations and services has grown significantly over the past 30 years, a lack of needed infrastructure and core funding has created challenges in the maintenance of Indigenous organisations.³⁰ Currently, the provincial government does

³⁰ OFIFC, OMAA, ONWA, *Urban Aboriginal Task Force: Final Report* (Toronto, ON: Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres, Ontario Métis Aboriginal Association, Ontario Native Women's Association, 2007).

not provide any infrastructure funding, core funding or capacity support to Friendship Centres. Nevertheless, Friendship Centres continue to deliver multiple provincial programs with limited support for administration and compounding issues of poor and inadequate infrastructure.

Until broad infrastructure challenges are met, including transportation and investments in community organisations, the province will be challenged to create a highly skilled workforce that is inclusive of, and accessible by, all Ontarians, especially urban Indigenous people. The OFIFC believes that it is important that the Expert Panel also consider intersections between its work and the work of various provincial initiatives such as: the Poverty Reduction Strategy, the Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy, the introduction of the *Child Care and Early Years Act*, Moving Ontario Forward, the Northern Ontario Multimodal Transportation Strategy, the *Aboriginal Child and Family Services Act*, the Minister's Advisory Council on First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Education, the Urban Aboriginal and Off-Reserve Policy Engagement Table, the Community Hubs Secretariat, social assistance reforms, and the ETSI initiative.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

- The Highly Skilled Workforce Strategy recognise, and call for strategies to close the socio-economic, education and employment attainment gaps that exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Ontarians;
- The Highly Skilled Workforce Strategy establishes an appropriate balance between upskilling the existing workforce, providing training for job-ready individuals, and facilitating extensive training and employment supports for those furthest from entering the workforce;
- Partnerships are sought with urban Indigenous not-for-profit organisations, DSSABs, CMSMs, and other organisations while ensuring there is accountability at all levels, especially at the community level;
- The Expert Panel look to expand government funded community based responses to labour market challenges, with a focus on increasing engagement of urban Indigenous people; and
- The Expert Panel call for provincial investment in community infrastructure required to support a highly skilled workforce that is inclusive of all Ontarians, especially urban Indigenous people.

CONCLUSION

The growing demographic of urban Indigenous people in Ontario, particularly children and youth, will remain challenged to join a highly skilled workforce when they continue to disproportionately experience higher rates of poverty. As such, it is imperative that the Highly Skilled Workforce Strategy include specific strategies to close socio-economic gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Ontario, while also looking to improve the often-times broken provincial employment and training support system.

APPENDIX

Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres Response to Premier's Highly Skilled Workforce Expert Panel Key Engagement Question 5

Question 5: What existing policies, programs or initiatives to create a highly skilled workforce can be scaled up or broadened to reach more people?

The need for more, and better, provincial employment supports for urban Indigenous people is evident considering that 84.1 percent of Indigenous people in Ontario live off-reserve,³¹ and that the Indigenous population in Ontario is growing at nearly double the rate of the non-Indigenous population (1.8 percent versus 1 percent) while over 50 percent of Ontario's Indigenous population is under the age of 27.³² Labour market trends indicate that Ontario will be facing a labour and skills shortage, in large part due to an aging population.³³ Meanwhile, the urban Indigenous population is growing exponentially, with over 100,000 Indigenous youth estimated to be aging into the labour market by 2026.³⁴

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.³⁵ Clearly, the employment-support programs and services delivered by the provincial government are not meeting the needs of urban Indigenous people. Programs and services need to be more efficiently and rationally operated to increase the impact and effectiveness of transitioning urban Indigenous people into meaningful, long-term employment and secure sustainable income.

Acknowledging the growing demographic of urban Indigenous people in Ontario, particularly children and youth, and their potential to meet the needs of a highly skilled workforce, it is critical that strategies are created to close socio-economic gaps that have contributed to lower education, training and employment outcomes. In particular, urban Indigenous youth will remain challenged to join a highly skilled workforce when they continue to disproportionately experience higher rates of poverty. For example:

³¹ Statistics Canada., *National Household Survey* (Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada, 2011).

³² 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): 14.

³³ Rick Miner., *People Without Jobs – Jobs Without People: Ontario's Labour Market Future* (Toronto, ON: Miner Management Consultants, 2010).

³⁴ 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): 14.

³⁵ Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities., *Canada-Ontario Labour Market Agreement, 2013-14 Annual Plan* (Toronto, ON: Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2013).

- Indigenous youth (0-19) represent 2.8 percent of the population in Ontario, Indigenous children made up over 18 percent of children in care in 2014;³⁶
- Between 2007 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;³⁷
- The average income of Indigenous people in Ontario is about \$27,944 compared to \$39,655 for non-Indigenous people;³⁸
- 36 percent of off-reserve Indigenous children under the age of 6 live in poverty compared to 19 percent of non-Indigenous children;³⁹
- Indigenous boys aged 12-17 are incarcerated at a rate five times higher than their share of the general population in Ontario and the proportion of Indigenous girls in Ontario jails is 10.7 times higher than their share of the general population;⁴⁰ and
- Food shortages and insecurity are a reality for many urban Indigenous families contributing to negative outcomes and inhibiting their health and wellbeing. In 2003, 79 percent of respondents indicated that they worried about running out of food, 35 percent of their children had gone hungry, 11 percent reported that their children had missed school because there was no food, and 7 percent reported that they had been involved with Children and Family Services because of food shortage.⁴¹

As such, it is imperative that the Highly Skilled Workforce Strategy include specific strategies to close socio-economic gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Ontario, while also looking to improve the often-times broken provincial employment and training support system.

Closing the Gaps

It is important to acknowledge the relationship between the socioeconomic gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Ontarians, as noted above, and the widely accepted disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous educational and employment outcomes. In fact, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada called on the federal government to develop a joint strategy with Indigenous groups to

³⁶ Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies., *Ontario Child Welfare Report 2014* (Toronto, ON: Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, 2014) Retrieved from: http://www.oacas.org/newsroom/releases/2014/2014_child_welfare_report.pdf.

³⁷ Jennifer Lawrence, "The New Face of Aboriginal Education", *Professionally Speaking*, March 2013. Retrieved from: http://professionallyspeaking.oct.ca/march_2013/features/index.html.

³⁸ Statistics Canada., *Census of the Population* (Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada, 2006).

³⁹ Statistics Canada., *Aboriginal Children's Survey, 2006: Supporting Data Tables* (Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada, 2008).

⁴⁰ Rankin, Jim. Winsa, Patty, "Unequal Justice: A Toronto Star investigation." *Toronto Star Online*, (26 February 2013), News/Insight Section. Retrieved from: http://www.thestar.com/news/insight/2013/02/25/unequal_justice.html.

⁴¹ Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres *Child Hunger and Food Insecurity Among Urban Aboriginal Families* (Toronto, ON: Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres, 2003).

eliminate education and employment gaps.⁴² Focus must also be given to the reasons why an achievement gap exists, largely a result of disenfranchisement, disadvantage and dispossession that Indigenous people have experienced in Canada historically and continue to experience.

With adequate investments in culturally-appropriate education, training, and provincial employment supports, along with tangential supports targeted at improving socio-economic conditions such as housing and mental health, can help to contribute to a highly skilled workforce. In particular, research conducted by the Centre for the Study of Living Standards (CSLS) in 2010 found that there would be vast economic benefits if the educational and labour market outcomes of Indigenous people in Canada reached the 2006 levels of non-Indigenous Canadians. If this was achieved by 2026, a potential addition of \$36.5 billion to the national GDP, and a \$14.2 billion decrease in government expenditures would be a result of eliminating the social well-being gaps that exist for Indigenous people in Canada.⁴³

The OFIFC believes that eliminating the social well-being gaps that are a reality for many urban Indigenous people is a critical first step to improving education and employment outcomes. Beyond direct education service delivery, Friendship Centres offer wholistic education supports to Indigenous learners during key transitions as they embark on their lifelong learning journeys. Indigenous student transitions are often complicated by many interrelated socio-historical variables that include, inter alia: intergenerational trauma, distrust of the education system, the devaluation of Indigenous Knowledge and cultures, high mobility, and lateral violence. Friendship Centres are community hubs that provide a safe, welcoming space for Indigenous community members to partake in culture-based services and programming aimed at promoting positive self-identity, and wholistic healing and wellness. It has been shown time and again that student confidence in their identity is the foundation of a broader confidence in their everyday interactions and is the basic impetus for academic success.

The OFIFC is concerned about the accessibility of postsecondary education (PSE) for urban Indigenous students given sharply increasing tuition rates and the inadequate preparation that Indigenous students ahead of entering into PSE institutions. Ontario tuition is the highest of all Canadian provinces and nearly three times the cost of neighbouring Quebec. In fact, Ontario has the lowest level of per student funding in Canada and tuition now covers 51% of university operating budgets in the province. The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) predicts that the average Ontario tuition will rise to \$9,483 by 2017-18.⁴⁴

⁴² Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada., *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action* (Winnipeg, MB: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

⁴³ The Centre for the Study of Living Standards., *Investing in Aboriginal Education in Canada: An Economic Perspective*, (Ottawa, ON: Centre for the Study of Living Standards, 2010).

⁴⁴ Erika Shaker and David McDonald, *Tier for Two: Managing the Optics of Provincial Tuition Fee Policies* (Toronto, ON: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2014).

<https://www.policyalternatives.ca/newsroom/news-releases/provinces-pursuing-two-tier-tuition-fee-policies-study>

The financial costs of attending a PSE institution are one of the most significant barriers to Indigenous students wanting to attend and successfully navigate PSE institutions, are often more acutely felt by Indigenous students, considering the high poverty rates of Indigenous people in Ontario, as referenced above. The OFIFC commends the Government of Ontario for investing \$1.5 million in 2015-16 in Indspire's Building Brighter Future's program to support Indigenous student bursaries and scholarships. Indspire reported outstanding success on its postsecondary funding program. Of students that received Indspire funding:

- 93 percent of Indigenous students earn a post-secondary credential;
- 82 percent of those graduates find work; and
- 84 percent of employed graduates report that they are serving Indigenous people in their current role.⁴⁵

These numbers demonstrate that when financial barriers are removed, Indigenous students are highly successful. Evidence shows that sustained investments in Indigenous student funding programs could play a critical role in supporting Indigenous students to realise their full potential and become engaged in the highly skilled workforce in Ontario.

Increasing urban Indigenous people's participation in the post-secondary education system

Many Indigenous learners require support from their communities, including Friendship Centres, to help them prepare for and achieve the goal of attending and completing PSE. It is imperative that the MTCU, and partner ministries begin to work collaboratively to improve Indigenous education transitions and outcomes within PSE systems, including in the second phase implementation of the Aboriginal Post Secondary Education and Training Policy Framework (APSET).

Initiate meaningful engagement with PSE institutions, the OFIFC and member Friendship Centres.

The MTCU should facilitate more meaningful engagement between OFIFC, member Friendship Centres and postsecondary institutions. This can be most effectively achieved via Aboriginal Education Councils (AECs). At the provincial level, there are two advisory councils that engage with MTCU: The Aboriginal Peoples Education Circle and the Council of Ontario Universities Reference Group on Aboriginal Education. The Councils are made up of university and college administrators without community representation. The MTCU should require these councils to have urban Indigenous community representation,

⁴⁵ Indspire, *Creating Positive Outcomes: Graduation and Employment Rates of Indspire's Financial Awards Recipients* (Toronto: Indspire, 2015).

which must include the OFIFC, in order to adequately maintain accountability to urban Indigenous communities.

In addition to provincial councils, all publicly funded postsecondary institutions have reported the formation of AECs. However these councils may have limited authority and decision-making power within their institutions. It is imperative to the achievement of strategic ministerial goals that postsecondary institutions establish high functioning AECs. A high functioning AEC will be equipped with the capacity to articulate Indigenous community education concerns and aspirations, identify barriers and goals, build a strategic plan to meet the education needs of their community, and ultimately hold postsecondary institutions accountable to Indigenous communities. The MTCU should provide local AECs with increased capacity building and input into the strategic planning of postsecondary institutions. Local AECs should also engage with urban Indigenous not-for-profit organisations, including Friendship Centres to ensure postsecondary institutions are held accountable to their urban Indigenous community.

Improve collaboration on Indigenous student transitions.

Internal collaboration must improve within the MTCU to better support Indigenous student transitions along the education to employment continuum. The current siloed structure within MTCU does not recognise the vast employment continuum and the pre-employment supports and services that are needed. Recognition of these needs will be demonstrated through investments in tangential services such as housing, mental health and food security when transitioning learners to the labour market.

The MTCU should develop a re-engagement strategy to engage with the Indigenous community at all stages of the lifecycle to encourage PSE as a viable option for the local communities. The MTCU should recognise that many Indigenous students will leave school, due to a variety of socio-economic circumstances including financial reasons and commitments, housing instability, care for family members and involvement with the justice system. Urban Indigenous youth, and mature students, will require specific and often multiple supports to make the transition back to school.

Friendship Centres are community hubs providing a safe, welcoming space for Indigenous and non-Indigenous community members alike to partake in culture-based activities and programming. For many Indigenous families and students, Friendship Centres are the first point of contact when migrating to an urban area. Locating cultural resources and culturally relevant services is a priority for students in transition. Friendship Centres provide a unique space for cultural continuity between the community-centred life of many Indigenous reserves to

what can be a more isolated, detached existence in cities. Friendship Centres provide a community space to build mutually supportive relationships, and to grow cultural connections throughout the Indigenous community. Given the high number of on-reserve First Nations and rural Indigenous people that must, at some point, transition to mainstream education coupled with the high mobility of Indigenous families, Friendship Centres provide essential services catered to the unique needs of the urban Indigenous community. As well, Friendship Centres continue to be the initial point of contact for people of all ages moving off reserves into cities and towns.

Currently, the OFIFC administers several programs that work together to address transitions for Indigenous students in Ontario's public school system. Three in particular work closely with children and youth in their education: Akwe:go, Wasa-Nabin and the Alternative Secondary School Program (ASSP). The MTCU should consider Friendship Centres as ideal locations to re-engage with the urban Indigenous community and provide culturally relevant and wholistic transitions support to Indigenous learners. Further, the MTCU should create a formal relationship with the OFIFC and other urban Indigenous organisations to ensure successful transitions for urban Indigenous students.

Ending outdated streaming practices in elementary and secondary school systems in Ontario.

As the Ontario labour market progresses into a knowledge economy, an increasing number of jobs are requiring post-secondary credentials. Without the completion of high school, employment and training opportunities become increasingly limited, especially in the growing highly skilled workforce. 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 PSE and training, including university, college, trades and apprenticeships.

This is further exacerbated by streaming practices used by primary and secondary school systems throughout Ontario. In fact, in some schools with high percentages of applied students, these students were 3.7 times more likely to be Indigenous.⁴⁶ This outdated practice of streaming limits urban Indigenous students from future employment opportunities, recognising the requirements of academic level Math and/or English courses for many university, college and trades programs. Considering the lasting impacts streaming can have on urban Indigenous students, it is critical for the MTCU, Ministry of Education (EDU),

⁴⁶ People for Education, *The Trouble with Course Choices in Ontario High Schools* (Toronto: People for Education, 2013), 4. <http://www.peopleforeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/trouble-with-course-choices-in-high-school-2013.pdf>

District School Boards to engage with local and provincial urban Indigenous organisations with the goal of ending this outdated practice. Should Indigenous students continue to be overrepresented in applied level high school courses, the development of a highly skilled workforce will be stalled, and the need for responsive intervention services later in life, such as social services and Employment Ontario's (EO) programs will rise significantly with this growing population.

Better coordination between Friendship Centre Apatisiwin (ASETS) programs and post-secondary institutions, specifically colleges, is needed for funding student transitions.

The MTCU should provide more clarity and support on how to access various training dollars currently available at postsecondary institutions through APSET. Currently, post-secondary institutions receive funding to provide training for Indigenous student transitions, while simultaneously Friendship Centres through Apatisiwin programs support clients by funding training at these institutions. More coordination would allow for better use of federal and provincial training dollars.

The MTCU should encourage and facilitate better coordination of funding student transitions amongst Friendship Centre education and employment support programs, APSET funding at postsecondary institutions, and other provincial employment support programs.

Begin provincial dialogue on the employment and training needs of urban Indigenous people and develop a provincial strategy to better coordinate related services.

To date, APSET has focused on supporting academic programming, namely universities and colleges. The MTCU should ensure that the next phase of APSET focuses on improving Indigenous access to skilled trades and increasing completion rates. Provincial dialogue is needed to ensure that the unique needs of urban Indigenous people are accounted for in skilled trades strategies and to ensure that services are coordinated across the province to reduce duplication and increase access. Current skilled trades programs and services are difficult to navigate, led by bureaucratic processes and are not widely advertised to diverse populations.

Improving the Provincial Employment and Training System

While the required changes are numerous and may vary between individuals and communities, the OFIFC believes that there are three substantial barriers, that if addressed will lead to significant improvement to the supports provided by the Government of Ontario:

Employment Ontario (EO) Employment Services

The current suite of EO programming is administered by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) through 51 regional offices and 435 non-profit and private service delivery sites and include pre-apprenticeship, apprenticeship, career development, student summer employment and adult literacy and basic skills. In 2010, EO introduced a new one-stop Employment Service Delivery Model in attempts to create more customer-centric, flexible and responsive services delivered at 412 sites. Within the new model, the number of Indigenous service providers and sites were reduced to four delivery sites (or less than 1% of all delivery sites), despite consultations that consistently indicated continued delivery of employment services by urban Indigenous agencies within Ontario are essential. Specifically:

The Government of Ontario should acknowledge that the current levels of urban Indigenous access are unacceptable and work to reduce barriers to accessing services.

Urban Indigenous people are accessing EO programming and services at glaringly low numbers. This could be for a multitude of reasons including, that EO programs are designed for the general public, discomfort in accessing services from non-Indigenous providers, lack of knowledge and confusion around how to access services and what is available, and eligibility limitations due to EI requirements for numerous federally-funded programs, including EO. Research has also shown that in 2011, EO services providers reported an average of 35 percent drop in youth accessing EO services and more than half indicated that this was due to strict measures of the new Employment Services model that prioritises clients most likely to achieve employment quickly.

According to MTCU, Indigenous clients represent just less than 3 percent of Employment Services clients. While the OFIFC considers this to be a demonstration of EO's inability to meet the needs of urban Indigenous people, MTCU considers this to be a success. In correspondence to the OFIFC, MTCU has stated that Employment Services are meeting the needs of Indigenous clients as a result of the total number of Indigenous people accessing Employment Services (3 percent) exceeding the percentage of Indigenous people in the province (2.4 percent). Considering the number of Indigenous people living off-reserve and the fact that Indigenous people experience much higher unemployment rates, the successfulness of status quo EO programs should be more critically examined by the Expert Panel.

Implement co-location of EO Employment Services in Friendship Centres throughout the province.

EO's Service Promise indicates that it seeks to "ensure that no matter which Employment Ontario Office an individual walks into they will get the help they need."⁴⁷ However, based on experiences by urban Indigenous people this is not always accurate. When researching the frontline policies and practices of EO services, OFIFC policy staff entered an EO service provider in Sudbury to inquire where an Indigenous person could access LBS training and other EO employment services. The OFIFC staff were informed that the particular location targeted services specifically to the immigrant population and were unable to indicate where services could be sought. Clearly the frontline services offered by EO in some communities do not adhere to EO's Service Promise.

Further, the low numbers of Indigenous clients accessing EO services leads to questions on whether EO is adequately carrying out targeted outreach to the Indigenous population to ensure the urban Indigenous community is aware of the programs and services available. However, even with increased targeted outreach there needs to be trust developed between EO and the urban Indigenous community to ensure effective service delivery. In fact, EO's Service Provider Guidelines indicate the importance of earning the trust of individuals who access EO services and programs.⁴⁸

Trust may be built between EO service providers and the urban Indigenous community may be facilitated by the co-location of services in Friendship Centres, while also increasing urban Indigenous access rates of EO Employment Services. With Friendship Centres delivering the ASETS-funded Apatisiwin Employment and Training Program, this integrated approach would also help to build the critical relationship between EO and ASETS and reduce duplication in services.

This innovative service delivery strategy through a satellite office within Friendship Centres would require a coordinated approach and strong relationships with EO, MTCU and other EO service providers. EO's service delivery is through various community agencies. Satellite offices could potentially be created through a formalised agreement with MTCU with the goal of coordinating local services and partnerships to provide more effective and efficient services among established employment and training programs. It will be critical to base these discussions on strong labour market information (LMI) data to build business case on a location by location basis.

⁴⁷ Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities., *Employment Ontario Presentation: Commitment to Aboriginal Employment and Training Programs and Services* (Toronto, ON: Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities, 2010), Slide 12.

⁴⁸ Government of Ontario. (2011). *Employment Service: Service Provider Guidelines*, p. 1.2-1. Available at: http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/eopg/publications/2012_13_eopg_sp_guidelines.pdf

Alternatively, under a place-based services model, Friendship Centres could partner with an EO community agency that would provide EO services one day a week or bi-weekly out of the Friendship Centre. This model of place-based services is being piloted by the Ininew Friendship Centre and the Cochrane District Social Services Administration Board. Services are anticipated to begin in late 2015 with EO Employment Services being delivered on site at the Friendship Centre twice per month. MTCU should implement place-based EO Employment Services at various Friendship Centres and provide multi-year commitment to ensure the successful implementation of the model.

Improve coordination and relationship building between EO Employment Services providers and Friendship Centres.

Following the consolidation of EO Employment Services, the number of Indigenous specific EO Service Providers was significantly reduced. This resulted in the loss of EO funding for urban Indigenous organisations, including some Friendship Centres. Despite the proven and demonstrated success of Friendship Centres in providing employment services to the urban Indigenous community, there remains virtually no coordination or relationships between EO Employment Services providers and Friendship Centres. The Indian Friendship Centre in Sault Ste. Marie formerly held an EO Employment Services, however since the consolidation, has received almost zero referrals from local EO service providers.

A Minister's Information Note, prepared by the Aboriginal Education Office at the MTCU indicated that the Ministry was going to "explore the development of a fund to support innovation in the area of Indigenous skills and training, which could assist in testing out new models to support Indigenous peoples' participation and success in skills and training."⁴⁹ New models to support the participation of urban Indigenous people's participation and success in provincial skills and training programs must involve the OFIFC and Friendship Centres as key partners and stakeholders. The MTCU should provide directives to EO Employment Services providers to improve coordination and build relationships with local urban Indigenous community members through engagement with Friendship Centres. Amending funding criteria or creating new funding for urban Indigenous partnerships will provide incentives for EO Employment Services to coordinate with Friendship Centres.

Increased coordination between provincial and Friendship Centre employment supports
The Provincial-Municipal Fiscal and Service Delivery Review highlights the low levels of integration among Ontario Works, Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), EO, and

⁴⁹ Aboriginal Education Office, MTCU. (2009). *Minister's Information Note: Aboriginal Employment and Training Initiatives*, p. 4.

other employment support programs, namely the federally-funded ASETS.⁵⁰ This lack of integration has resulted in duplication of services and makes access difficult and confusing for clients. As highlighted in the 2007 Urban Aboriginal Task Force (UATF), the lack of integration is significant between Indigenous and non-Indigenous programs, which is of critical concern with greater numbers of Indigenous people accessing mainstream services in urban centres.⁵¹

OFIFC's ASETS-funded Apatisiwin program has varied experiences with Ontario Works, ODSP, and EO programs. Often these relationships are informal and instances of miscommunication between social assistance caseworkers and Apatisiwin staff have resulted in frustration and/or loss of benefits for clients. There have been cases where social assistance caseworkers interpret Apatisiwin training interventions as a duplication of services and disallows it, when the reality is that the two programs could work complementary to each other (for example Apatisiwin pay for tools/books and Ontario Works pay for living expenses). Therefore, formalised partnerships between ASETS and provincial government employment supports programs would not only reduce duplication of services, but would also better enable social assistance recipients to transition into training and employment.

As community hubs for urban Indigenous people, Friendship Centres are in a unique position to provide culturally appropriate Ontario Works, ODSP, and EO employment supports in conjunction with Apatisiwin. In order for Friendship Centres to effectively deliver these services in conjunction with Apatisiwin it will be necessary to address the infrastructure and capacity of individual centres. The UATF highlighted the additional challenges facing Indigenous service providers, which can all affect effective service delivery for Indigenous people, including: disadvantage position to funding competition, receiving less funding than mainstream providers, overburden of reporting requirements, lack of stable long-term core funding, among others.⁵²

Additionally, the Friendship Centre movement also provides numerous labour force and economic development opportunities that can help to move urban Indigenous people to move away from a dependency on social assistance to meaningful training and employment.

Culturally Competent Provincial Frontline Service Deliverers

The need for public servants to be culturally competent was most recently identified in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action report.⁵³ Cultural competency training should be provided to all frontline workers, including Ontario Works, EO, and ODSP. Training should be delivered by urban Indigenous organisations

⁵⁰ Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing. (2008). *Provincial-Municipal Fiscal and Service Delivery Review*, p. 23. Retrieved from <http://www.mah.gov.on.ca/AssetFactory.aspx?did=6050>

⁵¹ Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres, Ontario Métis Aboriginal Association, & Ontario Native Women's Association. (2007). *Urban Aboriginal Task Force: Final Report*, p. 188. Available at: <http://www.ofifc.org/pdf/UATFOntarioFinalReport.pdf>

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 189.

⁵³ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada., *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action* (Winnipeg, MN: 2015, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada).

in order to ensure that frontline staff are aware and can incorporate local and regional Indigenous cultural knowledge into programming.

Upon completion of cultural competency training, frontline workers should be held accountable for the cultural competency and sensitivity of services provided to urban Indigenous people. This means that clients should be treated with respect and dignity, that frontline workers understand individual client needs and that their experiences are unique and often have been greatly influenced by intergenerational traumas resulting from colonial policies and practices.

Culturally competent services require that not only frontline workers become culturally competent but that the space where services are provided is also culturally competent, welcoming and safe. For example, in some Ontario Works offices, caseworkers remain physically separated from clients by partitioned glass. Ontario Works offices should be safe spaces for clients to bring children without fearing for their safety.