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Dollars and Degrees: Challenges for Northern Ontario's Post-Secondary Institutions

Northern Ontario Insights Series

By: Samrul Aahad

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Our main offices:

- Thunder Bay on Robinson-Superior Treaty territory and the land is the traditional territory of the Anishnaabeg and Fort William First Nation.
- Sudbury is on the Robinson-Huron Treaty territory and the land is the traditional territory of the Atikameksheng Anishnaabeg as well as Wahnapiitae First Nation.
- Kirkland Lake is on the Robinson-Huron Treaty territory and the land is the traditional territory of Cree, Ojibway, and Algonquin Peoples, as well as Beaverhouse First Nation.
- Each community is home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples.

We recognize and appreciate the historic connection that Indigenous peoples have to these territories. We support their efforts to sustain and grow their nations. We also recognize the contributions that they have made in shaping and strengthening local communities, the province, and Canada.

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About the Author

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Samrul Aahad graduated with an M.A. in Economics from the University of Saskatchewan where he was the recipient of the prestigious Boving Family Scholarship. During his Masters, he was able to contrast the conventional ways of analysis popular with economists with contemporary techniques such as ones used in machine learning. He has, previously, worked as a business/data analyst for various research organizations and industries locally and internationally.



Executive Summary

In the Spring of 2022, regional experts in Northern Ontario were interviewed to build a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities regarding the areas of food security, homelessness, mental health and addiction, immigration-migration, physician recruitment, and post-secondary education. The results of these key informant interviews led to unique insights into the state of these five subjects in Northern Ontario and highlighted the best avenues to address their challenges.

The insights received from experts are instrumental and shed light on the current conditions in the field. Learning from the individuals who have worked with and within local communities reveals opportunities to address these issues.

Findings primarily indicate a need for new policy strategies that effectively and holistically address some common issues:

1. Homelessness, mental health and addictions—alongside a lack of affordable housing, the transition between rehabilitation services or a correctional facility to life in society needs to be improved. Finally, a more collaborative approach with shared electronic records could yield a more effective and encompassing delivery of services;
2. Immigration—there is a lack of affordable housing for newcomers and a low retention rate in Northern Ontario. Additionally, the region needs to be better marketed to newcomers in order to address the existing labour shortages and high retirement rates;
3. Post-secondary institutions—in Northern Ontario suffer from a lack of funding generated by a freeze in tuition and funding levels. That is also true for Indigenous institutions, hampering their growth and stabilization. The attraction of international students has improved, but communities need to be welcoming to further attract and retain international students;
4. Food security—it has often been associated with food waste. However, insights suggest that income disparities are a more significant determinant of food insecurity. Moreover, having food that fits cultural preferences and nutritional needs is of the utmost importance. Furthermore, Indigenous land-based knowledge and self-determination present opportunities to address food security.
5. Physician recruitment—more funding and revised service agreements are needed to make health care jobs in Northern Ontario more attractive to newcomers, aligning financial incentives with position opportunities in smaller communities. As well, health professionals lack a better work-life balance, which hampers the attraction of more recent graduates to the region.

In sum, this series of insights highlighted some challenges that are perceived in Northern Ontario. However, these challenges also come with opportunities on which policymakers can act to improve the economy and quality of life in Northern Ontario.



Introduction

Good public policymaking does not happen in isolation. There are many individuals, organizations, and institutions that can – and do – provide valuable insight to decision-makers every day. As such, ahead of the Ontario provincial election in June, Northern Policy Institute interviewed regional experts about opportunities and challenges that exist for Northern Ontario in five different areas: food security; homelessness, mental health, and addiction; immigration-migration; physician recruitment; and postsecondary education. The results of these interviews can help inform the newly established provincial government as ministers begin to settle into and carry out their mandates.

Of course, policy advice does not stop there. Continuing to hear and learn from experts and other residents is important in ensuring policies and programs are appropriate for Northern Ontario regions and communities from Timmins to Sachigo Lake First Nation to Powassan and everywhere in between.



Postsecondary Education in Northern Ontario

Postsecondary education is an important contributor to Northern Ontario's economy and helps prepare its future workforce. But institutions have had to adapt quickly to COVID-19-related challenges. First, they were asked by the provincial government to pause raising tuition for domestic students. That request, coupled with rising costs and stagnant government funding, has put postsecondary institutions in a financial crunch. Harley d'Entremont¹, the former vice-president of two Northern Ontario postsecondary institutions, said the biggest issue faced by institutions in the region is the level of funding: "If you freeze tuition and funding, [it] is a complete stop of revenue [increase]." D'Entremont added that the "Ministry of Colleges and Universities provides some Mission-Related Institution Specific Grants, including some special grants given to postsecondary institutions located in Northern Ontario, and these Northern Ontario Grants haven't moved much over the years." Therefore, to ensure the ability of Northern Ontario's postsecondary institutions to work successfully, the provincial government should provide them with the financial assistance they need.

Moreover, there needs to be a focus on providing long-term funding to Indigenous postsecondary institutions to ensure their core expenses are covered. According to an upper management official at an Indigenous education institute in Northern Ontario, Indigenous institutes do not have core operational funding that can aid in stabilization. Instead, they are funded as programs and not as institutions. The individual went on to say that this is the main challenge in addressing Indigenous postsecondary challenges and hinders future growth.

There is also a misconception that Northern Ontario's institutions have difficulty recruiting international students. In an interview with an upper management official from a post-secondary institution in Northern Ontario, it was said that the school has experienced considerable growth in international student population numbers over the past 10 plus years. However, they noted that one of the biggest issues is ensuring the local community is welcoming to the students.

In addition to international students, the interviewee also recommended enrolling more Indigenous students to further address Northern Ontario's aging working population. On this point, the interviewee from the Indigenous education institute added that other growth opportunities include offering standalone programs, such as language degree programs in Anishinaabemowin, or programs built around traditions. Additionally, postsecondary institutions, in an attempt to increase enrollment, could also provide post-college diplomas and short courses in order to encourage lifelong learning, said the interviewee from the post-secondary institution.

In conclusion, a lack of funding for Northern Ontario's postsecondary institutions, insufficient funding for Indigenous postsecondary institutions to grow, and the degree to which host communities are welcoming and understanding of international students are seen as major challenges for Northern Ontario's postsecondary institutions. That said, there are some growth opportunities for these institutions, including attracting more Indigenous and international students.



¹ Dr. Harley d'Entremont, interview by author, April 07, 2022.

About Northern Policy Institute

Northern Policy Institute is Northern Ontario's independent, evidence-driven think tank. We perform research, analyze data, and disseminate ideas. Our mission is to enhance Northern Ontario's capacity to take the lead position on socio-economic policy that impacts our communities, our province, our country, and our world.

We believe in partnership, collaboration, communication, and cooperation. Our team seeks to do inclusive research that involves broad engagement and delivers recommendations for specific, measurable action. Our success depends on our partnerships with other entities based in or passionate about Northern Ontario.

Our permanent offices are in Thunder Bay, Sudbury, and Kirkland Lake. During the summer months we have satellite offices in other regions of Northern Ontario staffed by teams of Experience North placements. These placements are university and college students working in your community on issues important to you and your neighbours.

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