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Case Studies in Effective Indigenous Skills Development

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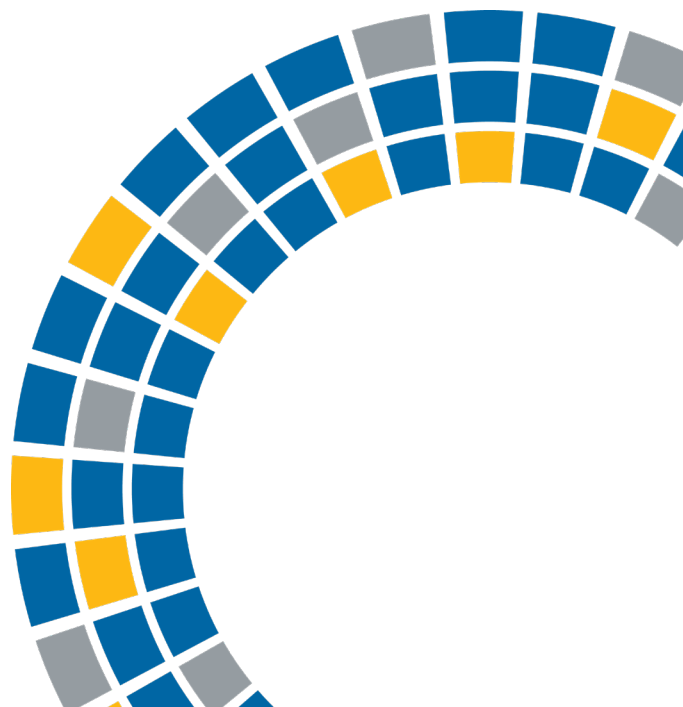
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Summary

In 2017, Northern Policy Institute (NPI) worked with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to undertake a study on Indigenous employment and skills strategies in Canada. One training agency, Kiikenomaga Kikenjigewen Employment & Training Services (KKETS), located in Thunder Bay, Ontario and one Tribal Council, Mawiw, located in Fredericton, New Brunswick were selected as case studies. Through these interviews, strategies for skills development, job creation, and overcoming barriers for success were discussed. What follows below is a summary of the major points and themes arising from these conversations as well as a list of best practices to support Indigenous workforce participation and training going forward.

CASE STUDY 1: KIIKENOMAGA KIKENJIGEWEN EMPLOYMENT & TRAINING SERVICES (KKETS) - THUNDER BAY, ONTARIO

Located in Canada's second largest and most populous province, the City of Thunder Bay is the largest metropolitan area in Northwestern Ontario with a population of 121,621 (Statistics Canada 2017). It is located on the north shore of Lake Superior and in 2016, according to Statistics Canada, 12.4 per cent (15,075) of the population of Thunder Bay identified as First Nations, Métis, and/or Inuit (Statistics Canada 2017b).

Overview of KKETS

KKETS holds the Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy (ASETS) for Matawa First Nations through Service Canada. Matawa First Nations is a Tribal Council providing services and programs to eight Ojibway and Cree First Nations (Aroland, Constance Lake, Eabametoong, Ginoogaming, Marten Falls, Neskantaga, Nibinamik, and Webequie) in the James Bay Treaty No. 9 territory and one First Nation (Long Lake #58) in the Robinson-Superior Treaty territory. KKETS works with Employment Community Coordinators (ECC) in each First Nation community they represent to provide training programs and to create employment opportunities for education, training and employment for community members (Matawa First Nations Management 2017).

KKETS also works in partnership with several organizations to deliver services and programs to Matawa First Nations communities in Thunder Bay, such as North Superior Workforce Planning Board (NSWPB), Confederation College, and Noront. All three partners were interviewed in order to better understand the programs delivered, and the successes and challenges of these existing partnerships.

Skills Development

Conversations with KKETS partners highlighted barriers such as labour mobility and education as obstacles for Matawa First Nations members to gain meaningful, well-paying employment opportunities. Prominent labour and skills challenges include, remoteness of communities, shortage of jobs, and lack of education and experience to fill available employment opportunities. There is also a gap between the skills needed in the job market versus the skills the community members possess.

To counter labour market and skills development challenges, KKETS offers several programs that provide skills upgrading opportunities to Matawa community members. The Aboriginal Skills Advancement Program (ASAP), allows adult learners to earn their Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD), giving them the opportunity to pursue further post-secondary education and skilled trades training offered by KKETS. Employment readiness training is built into the program to provide individuals with life skills training and basic employment certifications such as First Aid and WHMIS (Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System). The program is designed to help members succeed, providing academic, as well as financial, emotional, social and cultural support. In addition to ASAP, another program available to assist First Nations people with skills upgrading is the Nishnawbe Education and Training (NEAT) program.

The NEAT program, formerly known as the Ring of Fire Aboriginal Training Alliance (RoFATA), is a partnership between Confederation College, Noront and KKETS. The program provides training for employment opportunities in the mining industry for Matawa First Nations community members. This initiative offers training through 12 skills upgrading programs, categorized under Tier 1, Tier 2 and Tier 3 programs. The training programs range from Mining Essentials, Basic Line Cutting, Kitchen Helper, Remote Camp Supporter, Heavy Equipment Operator, Construction Craft Worker, Pre-Trades Welder, and many more (KKETS n.d.).

Under the NEAT partnership, a community member looking to upgrade their skills can enroll in the mentorship program offered by Noront. In this post-employment program, a member is paired up with an experienced worker to further refine skills and hone the tools necessary to excel in the occupation. The hands-on training is a key factor of success, as members not only get firsthand training from an experienced member in the industry, but also get an opportunity to strengthen their life skills in areas such as workplace etiquette, whether it be punctuality, dressing for work conditions, or following safety protocols. While labour market and skills upgrading programs facilitate some educational bridging programs for Indigenous learners, communities face other varied economic development barriers which impact job success.

Job Creation

KKETS identifies remoteness, lack of programs, funding and infrastructure, such as access to internet and roads, as key economic development challenges facing their Indigenous communities. Similarly, many Matawa First Nations communities are small, rural and remote, which makes it difficult to have an ongoing and steady economy. Limited employment opportunities and transportation to and from other communities add additional barriers.

Along with programs such as ASAP and NEAT, the Employment Integration Services Program (EISP) works with Matawa community members to remove barriers and obstacles to attaining employment, such as those mentioned above. The program helps participants by supplying a number of services, including resume writing, job search strategies, employment readiness assessments, work ethics training and orientation sessions. In addition to assisting community members, the program also provides cultural sensitivity awareness to employers through education and access to Elder supports, guiding and mentoring. Apart from those, KKETS also works externally with key organizations in delivering programs and services that help build community capacity and increase community members' participation in the labour market workforce (KKETS n.d.).

In partnership with NPI, NSWPB developed the Baakaakononen Ishkwandemonun (BI) - Opening Doors for You initiative, to acknowledge employers with inclusive hiring practices. Employers and service providers, who assist job seekers in finding employment, get access to existing supports to hire from growing labour pools of newcomers and Indigenous peoples. As a result of the BI Initiative, Driving into the Future (DITF), emerged as a collaborative project between KKETS and NSWPB. This project began after Indigenous youth routinely identified that not having a driver's license acted as a huge barrier to gaining employment outside of their communities, especially in large urban centers. The DITF program funded 30 Indigenous youth from five fly-in or winter access road communities to get their G1 licence, 29 of which were successful

in obtaining their G1 license. This program highlights that, for some Indigenous youth, opportunities to obtain employment is hindered by access and transportation challenges. Without transportation, many Indigenous youths from remote communities are unable to access the skills required to secure employment.

Another issue is the lack of resources, particularly comparable funding, which creates further disparity in the quality of education that is provided in Matawa First Nations communities when compared to more urban Northern Ontario communities. Notably, there is a gap in terms of delivery in First Nations education between federal (on-reserve) and provincial (off-reserve) education levels. When Indigenous peoples leave to attend schools outside of their communities, they are routinely found to be producing work at a lower level than a non-Indigenous student of the same age and grade would normally be able to deliver. Furthermore, many Indigenous students do not get the opportunity to complete high school education because it is not offered on-reserve and their families elect not to send their children away to complete secondary schooling.

Moreover, many First Nations communities are small and rural, and as a result it is challenging to find qualified teachers who are willing to go into these communities. This limited pool of available teachers further serves to negatively impact Indigenous peoples on reserve as they do not get the same opportunities as those residing in urban centers to develop diverse and robust basic skills. It is important to note that to provide the same level of resources and education in small, rural and remote First Nation communities, it will cost more than it does in urban communities. However, not expending those resources has a greater cost in limiting those populations from pursuing further post-secondary education. The inability for Indigenous youth to attain equivalent levels of secondary education has a profoundly negative effect on the overall economy, as individuals cannot enter and flourish in a competitive post-secondary education system with a sub-competitive skill set.

To address that barrier, the ASAP program offers a foundation credit course to help students fill those learning gaps. Unfortunately, many community members still struggle as they have been out of school for a long time, which adds additional obstacles for them to learn and retain the new information. To help address their concerns, KKETS often hires extra help to assist students one-on-one.

Related to the barriers with education is the development of financial and business acumen, which is a key component for entrepreneurial members of the community population that want to start up their own business. The ASAP program offers an entrepreneur credit through an elective course to those who want to learn more about being an entrepreneur. The course offers classes on business plan development and the fundamental requirements of opening up a business. Regrettably, due to funding limitations, KKETS does not offer any additional services or programs for entrepreneurs where they can seek help as they go through the process of starting their own business.

Overcoming Barriers to Success

A rising trend highlighted by many of the KKETS case study participants is that key players and service providers in the area of economic and workforce development are much more willing to work together today than has been the case historically. Overall, there is a drive to include Matawa First Nations community partners in important discussions and to seek local solutions to the issues that are facing the communities.

Although this is an improvement, there remains poor coordination of programs and services; particularly an absence of reliable mechanisms to access workforce planning and strategic coordination in the smaller communities. For many large capital projects happening in the Thunder Bay district, there is no inclusive coordination that could assist Indigenous communities to limit the harm, or maximize the gain, from new and greater opportunities. One example of this would be to ensure that lower skilled community members were supported in filling vacancies created when higher skilled community members take on next level opportunities. Consider this instance: 15 skilled and employed workers within the forestry management system move on to a bigger capital project such as a highway expansion because it provides better opportunities. If no one is looking ahead and coordinating those projects, when those 15 workers move on, there is no one readily available with the same skill level to replace them in the forestry management system. This creates a tough predicament for the community and often times, communities are not able to continue participation in one project without experiencing a loss of capacity in another project somewhere elsewhere. This is not an issue of a lack of human capacity, but rather a lack of capacity to plan in advance for normal friction in a functioning labour market.

Furthermore, while organizations such as KKETS are tasked with the responsibilities to help prepare community members with job readiness skills, their capacity is limited to their budget. This disadvantage, coupled with the planning capacity issue some communities face, can be troublesome for Northern Ontario if it is to take advantage of economic opportunities as they arise.

Despite this, KKETS highlights that by establishing a positive relationship between Indigenous communities and provincial, federal and private organizations, an entity is able to enhance its services and benefits for Indigenous communities in the short- and long-term. As the relationship grows, both parties can collectively discuss priorities and work together on projects that advance employment and training opportunities. Specifically, in the short-term, KKETS offers accommodations for community members who are enrolled in their programs. Depending on the participants' needs, these amenities range anywhere from financial support or transportation to child care services. This support provides an aid for the Matawa members to leave their communities in order to gain a higher education and undergo skills upgrading.

In the long-term, KKETS aims to be an established organization that is recognized and trusted by Indigenous communities to provide solutions to crucial problems by recognizing Indigenous peoples as key players and actively seeking their input. Currently, two programs are under review and waiting for approval, which will allow KKETS to offer services in each Matawa First Nations community and help members that are not able to travel outside of their communities.

Getting Local Governance Right

Good governance is important to make decisions that are informed, open and transparent. By collectively conversing with local actors, organizations can make assessments that reflect the broad interest of the community and in turn promote community confidence. KKETS works closely with several local organizations to collaborate on projects. For example, one of the training providers for the NEAT program is Confederation College. Given their resources and capacity to provide assistance, Confederation College has been able to provide better training in mining readiness for community members. Thus, it is a successful partnership in which both parties collectively developed an intake and assessment process to better align members interests and aptitudes with available opportunities. In short, putting the right people in the right program. With the ASAP program, the main funding agreement is with the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities with the academic component of that agreement stemming from a partnership with the Lakehead District School Board. As a result, based on the requirements of the programs and services that are needed, different partners are sought out to deliver those services.

One big challenge Matawa First Nations communities face is getting the funding to support employment and training services. In many cases, government is known to call for proposals that are not necessarily in sync with the labour market. For larger scale projects, there is still demand in sectors such as forestry and mining but the educational and skills enhancement infrastructure that is required to fill those gaps is lacking funding because, as the interviews revealed, funding tends to shift to the next latest and greatest item. It is fundamental to note that KKETS has demonstrated that for successful intervention and skills enhancement, it is not just about getting funding to support the training aspect, but also about providing wrap-around services that are essential for learners to be supported at home and in those training programs.

In closing, KKETS seeks to build community capacity and increase Matawa First Nations members' participation in the labour market. As demonstrated in this section, northern Indigenous communities face unique as well as general economic development challenges which include remoteness and internet connectivity as well as coordination and skills vacancy planning.



CASE STUDY 2: MAWIW TRIBAL COUNCIL - FREDERICTON, NEW BRUNSWICK

Overview of Mawiw Tribal Council

Fredericton is the capital of New Brunswick and along with being one of the main urban centres in the province, the city had a population of 101,760 in the 2016 census. According to the same census, 15 per cent of Indigenous people in New Brunswick lived in Fredericton. Of those, 76 per cent identified as First Nations (Statistics Canada 2017c).

The Mawiw Tribal Council represents three Indigenous communities in New Brunswick: Esgenoôpetitj, Elsipogtog and Tobique First Nations. Through integrated partnerships, Mawiw works with organizations and government agencies to improve employment, economic development, health and education service delivery. Alongside Mawiw, Joint Economic Development Initiative (JEDI), Esgenoôpetitj, Elsipogtog First Nations and St. John River Valley Tribal Council participated in this case study.

Skills Development

Isolation, limited mobility, language and discrimination are major labour market challenges facing Mawiw Indigenous communities. All three Mawiw communities are situated in rural locations. From a geographic perspective, small isolated communities face additional barriers as they lack access to key resources typically found in an urban centre.

Even when community members have adequate employment skills, they still undergo hardships in securing employment within or around their communities. This is due to a lack of nearby employment opportunities. Even when jobs are available in a neighboring location, members often hesitate to take them because it requires moving away from their communities. Living on reserve, members do not have to pay rent and the cost of living is significantly lower. Consequently, moving to a city is often not a feasible option for many.

Those who wish to commute to work outside of the community also face challenges, as many communities are not serviced by public transit. Lack of driver's licences is also an issue in rural communities as many cannot travel to the nearest office to take the test or they do not have access to training providers or vehicles to practice driving. To add, owning a vehicle is often out of reach for those who are in the pre-employment stages. Thus, transportation creates a big barrier for accessing training and employment opportunities.

Two central challenges are language and discrimination. New Brunswick is a bilingual province, which divides Indigenous peoples and creates linguistic enclaves. For Mawiw community members, bilingualism creates hurdles as it limits their employment opportunities, especially when securing full-time government jobs. Along with language barriers, Indigenous peoples also face discrimination when applying for jobs. Many organizations do not practice inclusive hiring practices, therefore many Indigenous peoples tend to face entrenched institutional racism in the labour market.

To overcome these challenges Mawiw works closely with their three communities in delivering several programs such as the General Education Development (GED) program and the Aboriginal Skills and Employment Partnership (ASEP). The success of the ASEP initiative contributed to the ASETS program which operates in every Mawiw community today.

The ASEP labour market initiative improved employment and training prospects for Indigenous peoples by supporting skills upgrading and providing on the job work experience opportunities that had lasting benefits for First Nations communities. The program offered training in resource based sectors, such as forestry, mining, oil and gas, fishery, hydro development and construction (Government of Canada 2008; Government of Canada 2009). Overall, two out of five ASEP participants (43 per cent) were able to secure employment in the project's target industry. A large majority emphasized the importance of acquiring relevant education and skills in attaining their employment (Government of Canada 2009). Thus, the ASETS program builds on those results and takes an integrated approach to help the Indigenous workforce prepare for, find and maintain employment in the short- and long-term.

Working in partnership with JEDI, Mawiw collaborates on how to effectively deliver ASETS services to its First Nations communities. JEDI is a non-profit organization in New Brunswick, which works with Indigenous communities, organizations, government and the private sector to advance Indigenous economic development (Joint Economic Development Initiative 2016). With quarterly meetings, all parties share best practices with one another and discuss oncoming projects to seek out partnership opportunities that would maximize project results.

Every Mawiw community also has an employment and training officer (ETO), who works with community members to develop employment goals and training plans. The ETOs refer clients to the appropriate training provider or assist them in finding suitable employment. However economic development challenges limit job prospects in First Nations communities.

Job Creation

Isolated First Nations communities face several barriers in pursuing economic development opportunities. The remoteness factor of communities' means limited outside traffic and this has a big impact on businesses wanting to invest in the area. This often limits diversity in economic development opportunities on reserves, as most organizations or businesses that come to town are related to mining. Local level band politics also plays a role in economic development opportunities, as Chiefs and Councils on reserve serve two year terms. This electoral requirement presents a huge limitation as community leaders are strained to carry out long-term strategic planning goals because they are constantly campaigning for a re-election. There are Economic Development Officers (EDOs) situated in each community to assist members with capacity development. These efforts are supported by JEDI, as they provide specific programs and service to help individuals start up their own businesses.

While Mawiw Tribal Council does not offer direct programs for economic development or entrepreneurship programs in their communities, JEDI works closely with all Indigenous communities to offer economic development and entrepreneurship services. Their Indigenous Business Incubator Program provides entrepreneurs with knowledge of business basics like preparing customized business plans, accessing funding and how to effectively market their products and services. In this 10 week program which focuses on tourism, trades and technology, individuals can also receive mentorship from experienced entrepreneurs working in the same field. The Indigenous Business Accelerator Program on the other hand helps individuals gain business knowledge in the aerospace and defence industry, with employment in Information Communication Technology (ICT), Industrial Manufacturing, Security, Clean Energy and Consulting. Participants of this program also get access to key resources such as venture capital funds, research and development organizations and meeting with players in the industry (Joint Economic Development Initiative 2016). Thus, community members are able to access entrepreneurship services through JEDI; however, with limited capacity, not everyone is able to take advantage of the programs.

Overcoming Barriers to Success

Education is a big barrier for Indigenous peoples starting their own business. Lack of business acumen can prevent people from seeking out appropriate measures to successfully run their own projects. Programs and services provided by JEDI and community EDOs attempt to tackle these obstacles. However, not every Indigenous community can take advantage of those programs due to limited spots and also because the programs may not relate to people's business idea. As a result, members with a solid business background still struggle in starting their own ventures.

Most Indigenous peoples do not have large investment funds and have to rely on loans from banks, government programs and private capital to support their projects. A big barrier to entrepreneurship ventures is the *Indian Act* (1985) because it creates barriers in accessing capital. Due to the provisions under the Act, community members are unable to use their reserve land as collateral for loans. Thus, there is constant uncertainty about ability to secure timely and sufficient loans (Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada 2003, 7). As a result, financial barriers prevent entrepreneurs from growing their ideas into self-sustaining businesses.

Another barrier that Indigenous community developers and leaders face is a lack of knowledge of the current labour skills and business capacity of their people. Not having a solid understanding of workforce needs prevents ETOs and EDOs from developing appropriate programs and services to advance community employment and economic growth. Secondly, if leaders are not aware of the rising needs or opportunities in their communities, they cannot adequately advocate or negotiate terms for building community capacity with other key organizations. Esngenôpetitj and Elsipogtog First Nations overcame that barrier by partnering up with JEDI to create a workforce database which helps connect community members with employment opportunities. The database, Working Warriors, is an online tool which community members can use to create or upload their resumes and apply for jobs within New Brunswick. This tool helps communities capture their workforce's skills capacity and then utilize that information to assist members with job readiness and employability skills (Kelly, 2017; Joint Economic Development Initiative 2016). Community leaders can now work together with external organizations to create a comprehensive strategic workforce development plan.

Getting Local Governance Right

In order to increase employment stability and align education and skills training with economic development initiatives, all parties are interested in constantly engaging with key players to discuss workforce gaps and arising opportunities. By having an open dialogue, all parties are aware of communities' vision for the future and can better align programs and services to meet the peoples' needs and local or regional opportunities. For example, during an exchange a government organization may learn about a potential project and the skills needed to move it forward. They may also learn of the skills inventory available in the Tobique First Nations community and the actual gap between the skills available and the ones needed. By then providing funding for a program to fill clearly identified and measurable skills gaps, outcomes are enhanced for all parties. Thus, by connecting and networking regularly, major organizations will be aware of opportunities that exist as they are in development and the response can be better tailored to match job availability with skills capacity.



SHARED BEST PRACTICES

Overall, the participants in these case studies highlighted both specific and general barriers facing Indigenous communities seeking to access employment and training opportunities. From the two case studies, six best practices were identified that support strategies for job creation and improvement of job quality for Indigenous peoples.

- To maximize participation of Indigenous peoples in the labour market, KKETS and Mawiw Tribal Council both stressed the importance of a collaborative approach amongst communities, employers, local businesses, training providers and the provincial and federal governments.
- All-around supports, not just education or training dollars, are essential. Barriers outside the classroom are often more important than barriers inside it.
- Building operational pathways from high school to post-secondary education will improve the representation of Indigenous peoples in higher education and professional occupations.
- To better equip Indigenous entrepreneurs with the fundamental business acumen, management and technical skills, the key is to deliver effective programs and services on employment, training and economic development in First Nations communities.
- To correctly tailor employment and training programs, it is important to carefully analyze the current and estimated labour market supply and demand factors in the target industries.
- To formulate an operative workforce strategy, it is key for community leaders and affiliated organizations to recognize the present-day opportunities and barriers to a sustainable Indigenous workforce in target industries, regions and sectors.





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Northern Policy Institute is Northern Ontario's independent think tank. We perform research, collect and disseminate evidence, and identify policy opportunities to support the growth of sustainable Northern Communities. Our operations are located in Thunder Bay, Sudbury and Sault Ste. Marie. We seek to enhance Northern Ontario's capacity to take the lead position on socio-economic policy that impacts Northern Ontario, Ontario, and Canada as a whole.

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