



"Our member companies in the residential construction industry are facing real challenges in finding the skilled workers we need – a problem projected to get worse. We are therefore very pleased to be helping to form a coalition between colleges and industry, across sectors, to ensure we have the workers we need for Canada's skilled jobs of today and tomorrow."

Kevin Lee is the CEO of the Canadian Home Builders' Association. Learn more about the coalition at www.accc.ca/industry.

FIRST NATIONS

Aboriginal education an imperative for Canada's economic prosperity

Prime Minister Stephen Harper's early February announcement outlining the federal government's plan to reform Aboriginal education reflects a growing awareness: full labour market participation of Canada's Aboriginal population is critical to the country's future prosperity.

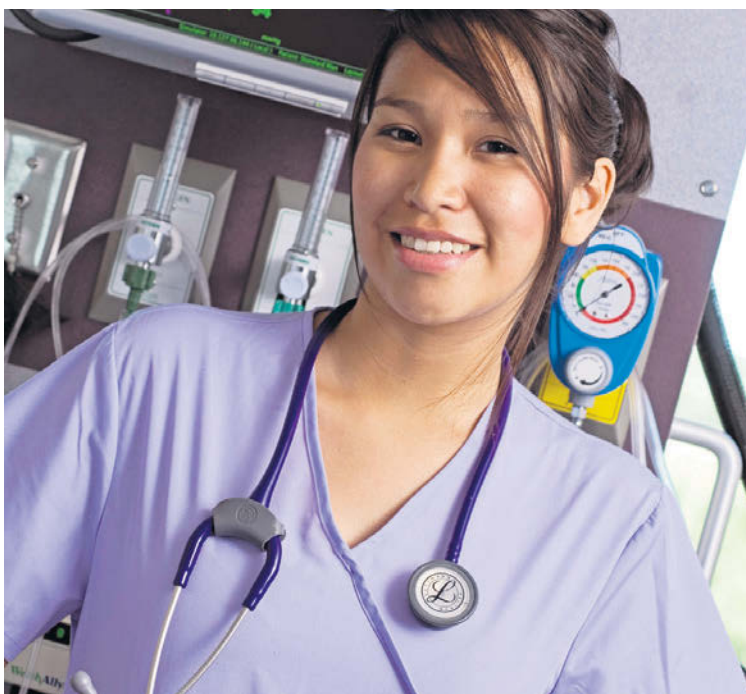
"In Canada, we have never had the First Nation education system that we need," he said in his address to an audience gathered at the Kainai High School on the Blood Tribe reserve in southern Alberta.

It's a reality that Canada's colleges and polytechnic institutes have been working to overcome for some time.

When it comes to post-secondary education, Aboriginal learners face significant barriers, starting very early in life, says Ken Tourand, president of British Columbia's Nicola Valley Institute of Technology (NVIT). About 50 per cent of Aboriginal students don't graduate from high school as teenagers, and even students who graduate may not learn the essential skills they need to succeed at a post-secondary level.

"We have students come to us with high school diplomas who are at a Grade 10 level in English or math, so we must first provide them with the foundational skills they need," he says.

Lack of confidence and role models are also formidable barriers for many Aboriginal students, adds Mr. Tourand: "We see it every day – many are the



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first in their families to study at a postsecondary institution, and most didn't have a good experience in the K-to-12 system."

But institutes such as NVIT are helping students meet these challenges, in part by providing a supportive learning environment to help ease the transition into the post-secondary mainstream. "Elders play an active role. NVIT was established by the five First Nations bands of the Nicola Valley, and we basi-

cally have grandparents on site. It's very much a family environment," notes Mr. Tourand.

Once they feel a sense of belonging and are given a chance to succeed, many students discover an untapped passion and talent for learning, he notes. "Students come in at a Grade 10 level; soon they're graduating with their certificate or diploma and transferring into UBC, SFU or the University of Calgary. Many then go on to graduate

with a master's degree.

"Less than 10 years before, they had a Grade 9 education and university wasn't even in their realm of possibilities," says Mr. Tourand.

Aboriginal students, including mature learners, also find their way into skilled trades careers through programs such as NVIT's Bridges into Trades program. Taught out of a mobile trades trailer in First Nations communities, the program introduces students to trades through two weeks each of training in welding, millwright, electrical and plumbing.

The usual next step is a trades program at Okanagan College or Thomson Rivers University, but one adult student decided to post his resumé on Kijiji instead. He received a call from an employer in northern Alberta within 24 hours. "Last time I heard, he was making more than \$40 an hour helping his employer transition more Aboriginal people into skilled trades careers," reports Mr. Tourand.

In Saskatchewan, home to more than 70 Aboriginal communities as well as a keen shortage of skilled labour, Aboriginal students now make up more than 18 per cent of the student population at the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology (SIAST). "We have a long-standing commitment to helping Saskatchewan's Aboriginal people capture opportunities, and to the social and economic development of the province," says Larry Rosia,

SIAST's president and CEO.

Aboriginal activity centres and elder access at each campus help students adapt to the post-secondary environment, but their success is also considered to be the responsibility of each member of SIAST's faculty and staff, Dr. Rosia explains.

That commitment includes partnerships between SIAST, First Nations and community-based training institutions such as the Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies (SIIT), Gabriel Dumont Institute and regional colleges, aimed at delivering post-secondary education to students in their communities.

Building on more than a decade of leadership in attracting and serving Aboriginal learners, SIAST is in the process of recruiting a director of Aboriginal strategy to "operationalize our plans to forge even stronger relationships with the Aboriginal communities," adds Dr. Rosia. "Our ultimate goal is to close the gap in program completion rate that exists between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students."

With similarly innovative initiatives underway in colleges and institutes across the country, "there is no better time for an Aboriginal adult learner to consider post-secondary education in order to build the skills and knowledge necessary to find employment," says Mr. Tourand. "We have a long way to go, but government, institutions and First Nations are working together in unprecedented ways to support students."

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