



## Key Findings:

- Quality of life is connected to socio-economic status.
- Education is a key factor in improving the health and well being of urban Aboriginal people.
- Culturally relevant educational resources meet a strong need expressed by urban Aboriginal communities.
- Emphasizing relationship and community building is significant in ensuring educational success and creating innovative educational spaces.

# Urban Aboriginal Education in Canada

Looking at key findings from the Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network Research

## Introduction

This research brief outlines key findings of selected Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network (UAKN) research projects on the topic of urban Aboriginal education. The Aboriginal population is the youngest and fastest growing population in Canada (NHS, 2011), making education a key policy consideration. Diverse ranges of education levels were examined in the UAKN research projects reviewed. All projects discussed here place emphasis on the inclusion of Aboriginal cultures in the learning process. These projects look at how urban Aboriginal communities are creating innovative educational spaces that include culture and meaningful partnerships between Aboriginal communities and local education systems.

## The Role of Education in Quality of Life

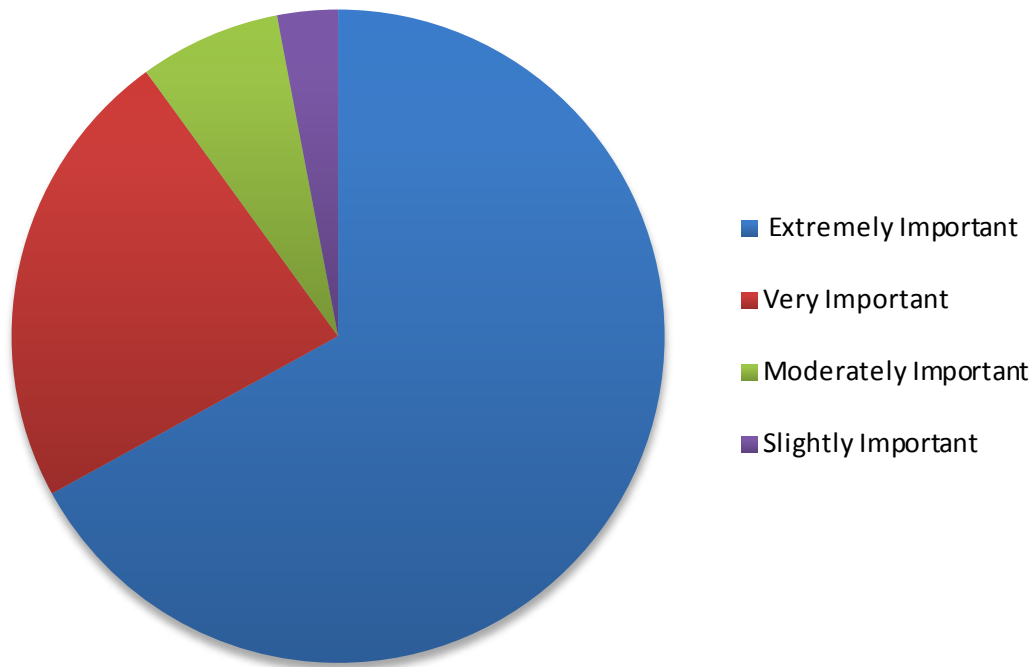
EnviroNics' (2010) Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study showed some strong aspirations toward improving the quality of life (QoL) of the urban Aboriginal population. In it urban Aboriginal peoples noted that a lack of access to education, income gaps, and government policy impeded their opportunities for success. Findlay et al. (2014: 31) found that improving the QoL for Aboriginal people goes beyond basic survival needs and includes cultural and spiritual needs. Access to Friendship Centres, traditional teachings and culture are important factors that are linked to success in education and employment.

Increasing education and training was the most important of six factors for improving urban Aboriginal quality of life, according to a UAKN research study (see Figure 1).

Findlay et al's. (2014) study revealed that education is an extremely important factor. The pursuit of education and training promotes meaning and purpose and demonstrates a participant's hopes, outlooks and aspirations for improving their quality of life (p. 25).



**Figure 1: Importance of Education and Training Opportunities for improving QoL of Urban Aboriginal People in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, 2014**



Source: Findlay et al., 2014; Retrieved from: <http://uakn.org/research-project/comparing-the-lived-experiences-of-urban-aboriginal-peoples-with-canadian-rights-to-a-quality-of-life/>

## Barriers to Education

When examining barriers to urban Aboriginal education, it becomes clear that the development of a strong sense of identity connected to culture and support systems help ensure educational success through the different life stages. Findlay et al. (2014) found that improving education can assist Aboriginal people in developing coping mechanisms and supports, to face such barriers such as: discrimination, residential school legacies, addictions, under- and unemployment, justice system involvement, childhood trauma, stress, and lack of transportation.

The 2012 Aboriginal Peoples Survey (APS) found that of those respondents who completed high school, 9-15% left school at least once before obtaining their high school diploma. Males commonly dropped out due to a desire to work, money problems, school problems and lack of interest. Females cited pregnancy or childcare responsibility as a major reason for leaving. Those who returned to school did so because they “realized the value of an education/wanted a diploma”. The 2012 APS demonstrates that by improving access to education through the right supports, programs, and services we provide a pathway to success (Statistics Canada, 2013).

Research found that culturally supportive education and time were two key factors to overcome barriers met by Aboriginal students. Beaton and McDonnell (2014) identified

that barriers exist when the use of culture and support systems are not a formalized part of the school district policy. Brown et al. (2014) looked at physical activity education for early learners in the urban environment. They found that time was a significant barrier. When creating meaningful connections and partnerships, there is a need for time and space where communities and the education systems can collaborate more effectively. Creating opportunities, culturally relevant resources, along with having honest dialogue about including Aboriginal culture in educational spaces is essential to all stages of development. This is to say that it is important to make the connection that education and culture are interconnected.

## Innovative educational spaces – Research for a better life

Culturally relevant and safe education is a key finding of all the UAKN research projects reviewed here. This research demonstrates that there is a need to continue creating innovative educational spaces and opportunities where Aboriginal people can flourish and grow throughout the life cycle.

This community-driven research takes a holistic approach. It identifies how culture plays a key role in one’s physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Having a strong Aboriginal identity and the incorporation of Aboriginal culture are key factors to ensuring educational success at any age. For instance, Beaton and McDonnell’s (2014) project

revealed that all programs involved in research on ensuring successful transitions between early childhood settings and kindergarten for Aboriginal students identified “relationship building, collaboration, culture and language as crucial elements” (p. 16). This includes the integration of culturally appropriate curriculum, including Aboriginal languages in both settings, and incorporating such culturally relevant practices as ceremonies, singing, dancing, and Elder participation.

Similarly, Brown et. al. (2014) in their work with urban Aboriginal partners on promoting physical activity among young children found that culturally relevant educational resources was a priority for communities. Culture and language woven into the educational curriculum enhances the experiences of the early learners and is connected to success outcomes.

Learning with activities that encompass culture and Indigenous knowledge systems through ceremony, song, and dance were effective for early learners. Beaton and McDonnell’s (2014) study demonstrates the value of providing play-based, culturally inclusive programs for young children that focus on healthy, holistic development. Resources from this project were adapted and developed to include Aboriginal culture and language

Indigenous paradigms remain effective tools for cross-cultural learning and creating innovative learning spaces for post secondary learners. The use of a holistic model in the educational process remains central, even if there is a shift to a more mature approach for post-secondary learners with a deeper analysis of the pedagogy and its approaches.

The UAKN project Learning together: Str8Up, Oskayak High School, and the University of Saskatchewan is an example of how innovative learning spaces are being created. Styvendale et al’s. (2014) research findings demonstrated how participants consistently identified an emphasis on relationships and building community among the most significant aspects in the learning process. The course structure, pedagogical approach, and activities that took place in the curriculum used the circle model as a central notion in structuring the teaching and the learning that took place among post-secondary learners.

The course used an embodied pedagogy, where participants shared their personal and lived experiences. This approach was central to gaining an understanding of the knowledge being shared. The research further found that story-telling has a strong impact on the learning experience. The power of the stories that were shared had a great impact on transforming participant worldviews from the dominant narratives found in post-secondary education (Styvendale et al. 2014). These three research projects, while exploring the experiences of diverse age groups, all found that educational programs that included holistic approaches to learning were important for student success and understanding.

## Conclusion

These UAKN research projects on education indicate that relationship building and the inclusion of culturally relevant materials and approaches create opportunities for educational success. This research brief reviewed research on the needs of early learners and post-secondary learners. It was found that early learners benefit by the use of Indigenous knowledge systems through moving, singing, dancing, story telling, and art. Post secondary learners benefited by taking part in a dialogue framed by Indigenous knowledge pedagogies. For both groups, the success is grounded in Indigenous ways of being.

## About this research brief

This research brief was a collaboration between the Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network (UAKN) and the Department of Aboriginal and Northern Development Canada. It looks at the latest research, statistics, and key findings on the topic of urban Aboriginal education. This brief highlights four UAKN research projects and select findings from the 2011 National Household Survey and the 2012 Aboriginal Peoples Survey.

## About us

The UAKN is a community driven research network with a focus on urban Aboriginal concerns. Our goal is to contribute to a better quality of life for Aboriginal peoples living in cities and towns by filling the current knowledge gap in urban Aboriginal research, programming, and public policy. The UAKN is a national, interdisciplinary network involving universities, community, and government partners for research, scholarship, and knowledge mobilization. For more information visit: [www.uakn.org](http://www.uakn.org).

## References

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Aboriginal Affairs and  
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Affaires autochtones et  
Développement du Nord Canada



National Association  
of Friendship Centres  
Association nationale  
des centres d'amitié



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