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# Policy Brief

## ***First Nation and Métis youth in Northern Alberta: Towards a more expansive view of transitions***

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*by*

*Alison Taylor  
University of Alberta*

*Tracy L. Friedel  
University of British Columbia*

*Lois Edge  
University of Alberta*

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*For further information on the Aboriginal Policy Resesarch Series  
contact John Graham at the Institute On Governance.  
tel.: (1 613) 562 0092 ext. 231; e-mail: jgraham@iog*

## Introduction

OECD reports on youth policy published in the 1980s illustrated that young adults follow a developmental process involving a linear and sequential movement toward their education and work goals.<sup>1</sup> However, recent empirical work has acknowledged that the normative path of completing education, starting a full time job, marriage, and beginning a family has become far less common in recent decades.<sup>2</sup> Some writers suggest that transition processes have become more uncertain, fragmented, and individualized.<sup>3</sup> In addition, transition outcomes tend to be poorer for particular groups, such as First Nation, Métis and Inuit youth.<sup>4</sup>

Given these more complex youth transitions, we argue that researchers should adopt a more expansive and holistic approach that considers the historical and institutional

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<sup>1</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, "Education and work: The views of the young" (Paris, Authors, 1983) and OECD, "Review of youth policies in Australia" (Paris, Author, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> Darcy Hango and Patrice de Broucker, *Education to labour market pathways of Canadian youth: Findings from the youth in transition survey* (Ottawa: Canadian Policy Research Networks, Ottawa, Ontario, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> For example, Manuela Du Bois-Reymond, "'I don't want to commit myself yet': Young people's life concepts," *Journal of Youth Studies*, 1, no. 1 (1998), 63-78.

<sup>4</sup> The poorer education and employment outcomes for Aboriginal vis-a-vis non-Aboriginal youth are well documented. See for example, Hango and deBroucker, *Education to Labour Market Pathways*, 2007, and also Harvey Krahn and Julie Hudson, *Pathways of Alberta youth through the post-secondary system into the labour market, 1996-2003*, (Ottawa: Canadian Policy Research Networks, 2006). There are also noteworthy differences in education and employment outcomes among First Nation youth living on reserve, those living off-reserve, and Métis youth (see Statistics Canada, 2006 Census of Population, Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 97-560-XCB2006028. Accessed online: <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca>).

context in which youth operate and in addition, these research approaches should place a greater emphasis on the youth voice and perspective. Our research into pathways to further education and work for First Nation and Métis youth in the Municipality of Wood Buffalo in northeastern Alberta tries to adopt such an approach.

## Our Case Study: Context and Method

In the early 1970s, Syncrude and Suncor were active in oil sands development in Wood Buffalo. By 2006, development had expanded to more than a dozen multinational corporations. The provincial government notes that expansion of the oil sands industry has been a major driver of economic activity in Alberta. However, rapid industrial growth in recent decades has resulted in problems that affect all people living in Wood Buffalo. Some of these problems include a shortage of affordable housing, a lack of day care facilities, an increasing rate of homelessness, and reduced access to medical care.

In recent years, industrial expansion has also brought change to the lives of First Nation and Métis people in northern Alberta communities. As a result of industrial development in their traditional homelands, many First Nation and Métis families have left the community to pursue opportunities for education and work. Comments by our interview participants suggest concerns about the impact of economic development on the environment, and the increasing dependence on a boom and bust resource economy as opposed to more sustainable ways of life.

First Nation and Métis groups make up 6,465 or 12.3% of the population in Wood Buffalo compared to 5.8% in Alberta according to the 2006 Census.<sup>5</sup> This is the

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<sup>5</sup> Statistics Canada, Wood Buffalo, Alberta (Table), 2006 Community profiles. 2006 Census. Statistics Canada. Catalogue no. 92-591-XWE. Ottawa. Released March 13,

highest proportion of Aboriginal people in any Census Metropolitan Area/Census Area in the province. The proportion of the Aboriginal labour force employed in the trades-related occupational category in Wood Buffalo was close to 40% compared to just over one-quarter in Alberta overall.<sup>6</sup> Trades-related occupations are therefore predominant in Wood Buffalo, especially for those who identify as Aboriginal. These occupations are also very gendered—of those involved in trades-related occupations in Wood Buffalo, 90% were male.

Our data collection activities involved visits to several communities in the municipality of Wood Buffalo, including the city of Fort McMurray, each of the five First Nations, and several Métis communities in the municipality.<sup>7</sup> Recruitment of participants was based primarily on ensuring geographical representation, including First Nations and Métis youth enrolled in different levels and kinds of education, and involving a variety of education and training providers. Sixty-five semi-structured interviews and focus groups involving 91 individuals were conducted between March and October of 2008.

### **Challenging Transitions from Rural to Urban Schools**

Three of five First Nation and Métis communities in Wood Buffalo did not have

access to high schools in their immediate vicinity at the time of our study. Overall, interview participants expressed concern about the quality of education available in rural areas. The transition from small rural schools (very often with enrolments of less than 120 students) to large high schools in Fort McMurray (where enrolments can exceed 1,000 students), we heard, can be very difficult for some First Nation and Métis students. Coupled with the change in size of school is the change in student make-up. Students go from being among an Aboriginal majority in their home community to being a minority in a largely non-Aboriginal student population. In addition, moving away from home can result in students losing family and other community support networks.

Added to this, more than one interview participant observed that students from First Nation and Métis communities can be two or three years behind in academic learning at the time of transfer from their home community to a high school in Fort McMurray; they thus start at a disadvantage. They are then more likely than non-Aboriginal students to be enrolled in courses that do not lead to post-secondary education. Further, according to a high school teacher interviewed, few Aboriginal youth participate in high school programs leading to trades apprenticeships because they do not meet the criteria based on attendance and grades.

As a result of low expectations, being subject to racism (mentioned by several participants) and other perceived barriers, First Nation and Métis students can end up dropping out.

These students face a dilemma, in that a high school diploma or equivalent is the minimum employment entry requirement established by the large oil companies and a requirement for many technical and trades programs. Providing upgrading for students to complete their high school diploma or

2007. Accessed online:

<http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census06/data/profiles/community/Index.cfm?>

<sup>6</sup> Statistics Canada, Community profiles, Regional municipality of Wood Buffalo, 2006.

Accessed online: <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca>.

<sup>7</sup> The five First Nations that comprise the Athabasca Tribal Council (ATC) are: Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, Chipewyan Prairie First Nation, Fort McKay First Nation, Fort McMurray 468 First Nation, and Mikisew Cree First Nation. There are also long established Métis communities in Fort McKay, Fort Chipewyan, Anzac and Conklin.

equivalent, or to gain prerequisites for further education has therefore become an important activity for Keyano, the local college, which offers upgrading programs at five “learning centres” located in First Nation and Métis communities. Of the Aboriginal students enrolled at Keyano College between 2005 and 2008, 40 percent were enrolled in upgrading programs.

However, despite the rhetoric of a high school diploma as the “ticket” to stable, high paying work in industry, it is no guarantee. For example, one high school educator notes that First Nation and Métis graduates often have trouble meeting the requirements set by corporate recruiters (e.g., trades entry test, drivers’ license). Several participants in First Nation and Métis communities felt that Aboriginal youth are disproportionately channelled into “unskilled” and semi-skilled work.

It is in this often difficult context that First Nation and Métis youth make their “choices” in transitioning from school to work.

### **Understanding Youth “Choices”**

A significant number of the female youth we spoke to in Wood Buffalo had children at a young age and we met many of them as they were later trying to complete high school through upgrading. In fact, almost two-thirds of upgrading students are female. While teenage motherhood has been associated with poor education and labour market outcomes,<sup>8</sup> such “choices” can also be seen as a response to difficult education transitions. For example, one young woman from Conklin notes that she was two academic grades behind when she moved to a school in the city of Fort McMurray. Another adds that youth who moved to attend school in the city “dropped out,

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<sup>8</sup> Eric Guimond and Norbert Robitaille, “When teenage girls have children: trends and consequences”, *Horizons*, 10, no. 1 (2008), 49-51.

everybody that I know. And some of them have kids.” Forming relationships and/or having children can thus be viewed as choices that are at least partially influenced by an intolerable school situation. Such decisions could also be seen as an assertion of adult identity and/or an alternative pathway to engage or re-engage family/community support networks.<sup>9</sup>

Teen parents lack institutional supports such as childcare both in First Nation and Métis communities and in the city of Fort McMurray. And even if a mother is able to complete her high school diploma or post-secondary education, available employment with industry generally involves shift work, long hours and travel to plant sites. Without family support or daycare arrangements that match work schedules, it becomes extremely difficult to take this on.

In sum, considering factors that may lead to early parenthood (e.g., being “pushed out” of school, lacking other meaningful options) and institutional deficits (e.g., lack of formalized childcare) helps us to better understand First Nation and Métis youth “choices” and outcomes.

### **Challenging Current Policy Assumptions**

Our study revealed also that the assumption that success for youth requires completing formal education beyond high school often contrasts with the experiences of many male youth in First Nation and Métis communities. For example, a Métis youth

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<sup>9</sup> We also heard the less common story of youth who had more positive experiences in provincial schools. For example, a young woman from Fort Chipewyan moved to Fort McMurray for high school with her parents and younger brother when she was 15 years old. Her parents reportedly moved to Fort McMurray specifically for their children’s education and although, like others, she found the transition to be challenging academically, her “whole little support system” was intact.

from Conklin, did not see school as important for what he wanted in life; nor was it his preferred context for learning. Brian left school in grade 10 and began working as a labourer. His father had “only a grade 3 or 4 education,” getting work “where he can” as a general labourer. At age 27, Brian was living with his grandmother, without dependents of his own. He had worked as a slasher<sup>10</sup> and had held other labour jobs in the past ten years or more with various contractors. He enjoyed working outdoors and the fact that he could work when he wanted. Noting that he grew up learning to trap and still likes to hunt and fish, he says, “There’s still a few of us around that like to keep up our heritage, trapping and keep the language.”

The meaning and priority Brian attached to paid work and ‘permanent’ employment was therefore quite different from that assumed by policy-makers. Further, his decisions about work were clearly made in relation to other decisions about family (e.g., helping his grandmother) and lifestyle. Brian had thought about upgrading as a way to ensure that he has more stable work in the future; he also recognized the disparity in earnings and benefits between the core and contract workforce, between the more highly educated and those with high school or less. For him, however, the cost of the long road to gaining the required credentials was too high. Brian’s story, echoed in stories of other community members and service providers, helps us to see where policies are failing.

### **Summary of Systemic Issues and Policy Recommendations**

In challenging dominant ideas about youth pathways to the labour market, our findings inform current policy discussions. For example, the transition from small rural schools populated mostly by First Nation

and Métis students to large town schools where they are a minority is made even more challenging when students are behind academically, face racism, and are away from family and community support structures. Youth regularly drop out as a result.

However, they often enrol later in high school upgrading and training programs. The challenges at this stage include limited access to college programs in communities aside from short-term upgrading, insufficient funding to meet the high cost of living in Wood Buffalo, and lack of formal childcare and other supports. In a situation where large corporations place great value on credentials and testing to select employees, First Nation and Métis entrants are often screened out on this basis, and instead are forced to work for contractors as labourers or in other unskilled or semi-skilled work.

Further, those seen by mainstream society as “successful” in employment may feel tensions around the environmental impact of their work in the oil sands industry. They may experience other “costs” of employment such as the need to leave their home communities, to live with the effects of long hours/shift work on families, and for women, to face the reality of gender discrimination.

In our view, provincial and federal policy responses must include actions that more holistically address challenging transitions. In terms of education policy, this includes:

- addressing the *academic gap* between isolated northern and urban schools;
- ensuring that students enrol in high school courses that *keep their post-secondary education options open* as much as possible;
- school districts providing *additional supports* to First Nation and Métis youth and their families when

<sup>10</sup> Slashing involves cutting trees and clearing the bush for industry during the construction phase of oil field operations.

- students must leave their home communities for high school; and
- ensuring enhanced support (living allowances, childcare provisions, length of programming) for First Nation and Métis students seeking to upgrade their education.

Instead of seeking ways to move youth through the system more efficiently, policies could provide more opportunities for them to “*move through the systems more slowly, to move out and then back into systems, and to reconsider their post-secondary education decisions once they have been made.*”<sup>11</sup>

The Canadian Council on Learning<sup>12</sup> promotes a vision of Aboriginal learning as, among other things, lifelong and experiential. This vision is consistent with our observation that more could be done to *recognize and accredit informal learning*, and to *develop bridging programs* as a way to recognize the barriers for some Aboriginal people presented by employment requirements for specific credentials. In addition, while there have been attempts by corporations to encourage and accommodate Aboriginal workers, more must be done to ensure the dialogue around work and learning is an *inter-cultural exchange*. A report based on our research and the longer paper on which this brief is based<sup>13</sup> emphasize the need to frame work and learning issues within First Nation, Métis and Inuit histories and perspectives. It is therefore important that there is *mutual engagement* with First Nation, Métis and

Inuit communities, community members, and scholars at all stages of policy and research processes.

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<sup>11</sup> Krahn and Hudson, *Pathways of Alberta Youth*, p. 60.

<sup>12</sup> Canadian Council on Learning, *Redefining how success is measured in First Nations, Inuit and Métis learning*. (Ottawa, Authors, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Alison Taylor, Tracy Friedel, and Lois Edge, *Pathways for First Nation and Métis youth in the oilsands*, (Ottawa, Canadian Policy Research Networks, 2009). Alison Taylor, Tracy Friedel and Lois Edge, *First Nation and Métis youth in Northern Alberta: Toward a more expansive view of transitions*. (Ottawa, Aboriginal Policy Research Initiative, 2010).