

INCREASING INDIGENOUS PARTICIPATION IN ONTARIO'S SKILLED TRADES **SUPPORTING ONTARIO'S SKILLED TRADES SECTOR POST-COVID19**

ISSUE

How can the Government of Ontario increase Indigenous participation in skilled trades to address the sector's ongoing labour shortage?

BACKGROUND AND CURRENT CONTEXTS

Ontario skilled trades sector experienced declining participation prior to COVID-19.

- In 2019, there were approximately 200,000 job openings across all occupations and trade industries with 13,000 openings in the construction sector alone.
- 26,000+ workers are needed over the next 5 years to create the labour market flexibility needed to deliver planned capital projects on schedule.
- As of 2020, Ontario's mining sector directly employed over 28,000 people and as of 2021 Q1, had the highest annual increase among trades at 1.9%.

Indigenous population trends raise concerns over generational economic inequality.

- Since 2018, Canada's Indigenous population has grown at 4 times the rate of Canada's non-indigenous population, lowering the demographic's median age to 27.
 - Compared to an average age of 40 for non-indigenous Canadians.
- The National Aboriginal Economic Development Board reported decreasing gaps in employment, education and income inequality would lead to an annual boost of 1.5% in Canada's total GDP amounting to an additional \$27.7 billion.
- In 2020, unemployment among Indigenous Ontarians was 3% higher than non-indigenous.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Ontario can build on recent actions aimed at supporting Indigenous trades employment.

- In 2021, Ontario invested \$3.6 million to help 150 Indigenous people receive free training to start careers building and running the new Greenstone Gold Mine in Geraldton.
- Programs rely on partnerships with community-based organizations, industry associations and federal partners to fund and facilitate program implementation in Northern Ontario.

Coordinating communications with Indigenous community leaders, apprenticeship educators and federal counterparts can increase audience reach and engagement.

- Disjointed stakeholder communications create confusion among youth, making the system difficult to navigate and deterring apprenticeship enrollment and entry-level employment.

More data is required to examine Indigenous employment trends and funding gaps.

- Qualitative data is required to supplement National Labour Survey results, to understand Indigenous economic contexts and to highlight gaps in existing training programs.

Fostering welcoming work environments is key for Indigenous employee success.

- A culturally safe, appropriate, and welcoming environment with necessary health and safety support mechanisms can encourage Indigenous youth to participate and succeed.
- Indigenous youth believe education institutions and workplaces neglect their cultural values.

Australia's strategies and British Columbia's consultations exhibit the impact of employer buy-in and ongoing apprenticeship training.

- Upon completing apprenticeship, ongoing training and accreditation in workplace settings connects soft skills with on-the-job knowledge, advancing Indigenous career development.

OPTIONS AND ANALYSIS

1. Launch a Provincial inquiry into the labour market impacts of COVID-19 on Indigenous Ontarians, with a round table for increasing skilled trades participation.

Rationale:

- Addresses the need for updated quantitative labour data and qualitative experiential data as a baseline for improving service delivery and reducing implementation gaps.
- Direct stakeholder feedback streamlines future economic and labour market policy while aligning with the successful engagement practices taken by Australia and British Columbia.
- Researching Indigenous experiences supports the Skilled Trades Panel's mandate to report on broad industry perspectives and the diverse nature of Ontario's skilled trades.

Risks:

- Consideration of equitable representation and risk of tense intra-stakeholder relations.
- Willingness to accept and validate stakeholders' feedback as to incentivize engagement.
- Planning and operational costs will need to consider mode of and contingency planning.

2. A tailored, multilingual communications strategy developed collaboratively with Indigenous community leaders and educational guidance counsellors.

Rationale:

- Raises awareness of the skilled trades as an employment option for Indigenous youth.
- Working with Indigenous community leaders and current trades workers helps design communications which connect to the unique circumstances of each region.
- Utilizing a combination of social media and physical advertising in various languages helps reach broad audiences and reduce barriers to information access.

Risks:

- Physical advertising to reach Indigenous communities in Ontario's remote and northern regions may increase costs and require stakeholder and intergovernmental collaboration.
- Utilizing the advice from local Indigenous community leaders who experience unique circumstances of northern and rural regions and potential lack of digital resources.

3. Increase financial support for organizations providing workshops, tailored to, and run by Indigenous skilled trades professionals, targeting individuals at various stages of professional development.

Rationale:

- Upholds the Province's moral commitment to advancing Indigenous youth's education and employment opportunities.
- Supports organizations already engaged with the issue and helps promote cohesive and clear messaging to encourage Indigenous participation in skilled trades positions.
- Leverages existing programs and partnerships with organizations who are familiar with the unique circumstances Indigenous workers face and experienced providing direct support.

Risks:

- Performance measurement requires data sharing and stakeholder collaboration due to various partnerships with industry and not-for-profit organizations.
- Approach does not address the lack of basic skills such as numeracy, literacy and technical skills currently hampering indigenous success in the labour market.

4. Increase cultural competency training in secondary school curriculums, apprenticeship process, and journeypersons certification to foster welcoming workplace environments.

Rationale:

- Equips non-Indigenous students, educators and employers with knowledge and skills to support Indigenous students and co-workers, ensuring collective success of skilled trades.
- Promotion of communication skills helps employers facilitate a smooth transition into the workforce, as is evident from successful policies in Australia and British Columbia.
- Training reassures Indigenous workers their colleagues are knowledgeable and respectful of cultural values, encouraging pursuit of enrollment and entry-level employment.

Risks:

- Implementing secondary school programs involves sizable investment in education, and coordination with education boards, apprenticeship educators and guidance councillors.
- Performance measurement requires ongoing tracking and surveying which can be complicated by insufficient baseline data and the potential impacts of Indigenous self-identification on estimating program effectiveness.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following actions are not mutually exclusive. It is recommended Ontario takes the following immediate actions with consideration of pursuing longer-term options:

Immediate Actions

1. Launch a Provincial inquiry into the labour market impacts of COVID-19 on Indigenous Ontarians, with a round table for increasing skilled trades participation.
2. A tailored, multilingual communications strategy developed collaboratively with Indigenous community leaders and educational guidance counsellors.

Long-Term Actions

3. Increase financial support for organizations providing workshops, tailored to, and run by Indigenous skilled trades professionals, targeting individuals at various stages of professional development.
4. Increase cultural competency training in secondary school curriculums, apprenticeship process, and journeypersons certification to foster welcoming workplace environments.

Considering the Government of Ontario's recent commitments and investments, it is recommended to first launch an official inquiry into the effects of COVID-19 on, specifically, the Indigenous labour market. A round table aimed at increasing Indigenous participation in the skilled trades sector will help identify specific implementation and fundings gaps through direct stakeholder feedback on regional economic contexts. This is further necessary based on current limitations to Indigenous Labour statistics. Strategic communication helps garner public attention and support, while subsequently considering further financial support and education and apprenticeship reform. The scale and scope of long-term policy responses should remain flexible and adaptive based on the Provincial inquiry findings and continued dialogue with Indigenous community, educational leaders, and industry associations.

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